

Another World Survival

Min-maxing
my Support and
Summoning
Magic

6

Author: Yokotsuka Tsukasa

Illustrator: Manyako





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Hanashi
MEDIA



“.....”

“.....”

1ST YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT
KAZUHISA KAYA

3RD YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT
TAMAKI RYUKI

“Come on, Mia-chan, how does it feel?”

3RD YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT
ARISU SHIMOZONO

“Ahh!”

*Aww!

1ST YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT
MIA TAGAMIYA



"I'm so glad! You
came back safely..."

"It's so
YURI-LIKE!!"

World Tree's
Resident

Rushia

Shrine Maiden of
the World Tree

Leen



*"Hmm, it's a bit tight.
isn't it?"*



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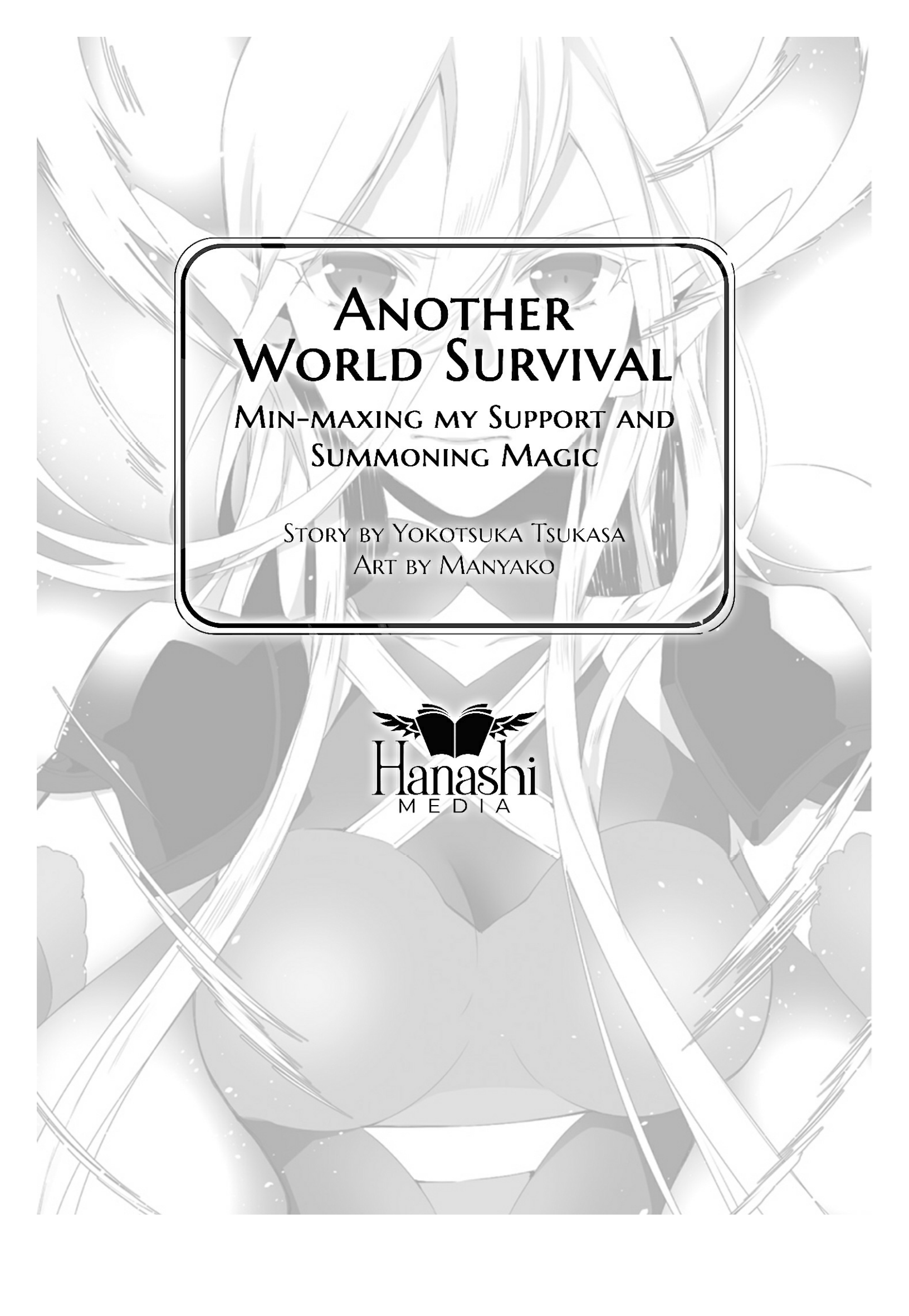
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ANOTHER WORLD SURVIVAL

MIN-MAXING MY SUPPORT AND
SUMMONING MAGIC

STORY BY YOKOTSUKA TSUKASA
ART BY MANYAKO



Chapter 125: The Day the World Ended

I was in the thick of a battle against a massive army of orcs, fighting alongside my comrades. No matter how many familiars I summoned, we were outnumbered and overwhelmed by the sea of enemies. Desperate, I tried to stay clear of the onslaught of monsters.

This is a dream, whispered a faraway part of my mind as if trying to shield me from the harsh reality.

Suddenly, I saw a flash of rusty metal to my left, and a sword slashed through my shoulder. An agonized scream escaped my lips as I staggered back.

“Kazu-san!” Arisu cried out. She had been fighting next to me, and as she rushed to my aid, her face was a mask of horror. “K-Kazu-san...” Her voice broke as she stammered my name.

Confused, I tried to tell her it was dangerous to stop in the middle of a battlefield. But her gaze remained fixed on my shoulder. Puzzled, I followed her gaze to the injury and felt a cold shock—my blood was a deep, unnatural blue.

“Why...” I murmured, stunned.

Rushia, who was standing behind me, nodded as if this was the most natural thing in the world. “I see,” she said, her voice steady and calm. “It’s because you’re Rank 9 now.”

I whipped around to face her, pain forgotten. “What do you mean?”

“Being Rank 9 means you’ve transcended the realm of humans. You’re a unique force in this world. So... you’ve become a monster.”

I turned back around, heart pounding in my chest. There stood Tamaki, covered in wounds like I was. Her blood, too, was a chilling shade of blue.

“I’m in a bit of a pickle, aren’t I?” she said with a nervous chuckle. “Kazu-san, my blood’s blue, too.”

“I see,” I replied, feeling a wave of lethargy wash over me. “So, Tamaki, did you get to Rank 9 in Swordsmanship as well?”

“Seems like it, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Yeah, it’s inevitable,” Rushia interjected, pulling out a knife and making a cut on her own arm. Blue blood flowed out, staining her pale skin. “Hey, look, we match.”

“Rushia, you...”

“Actually, I’m a doppelgänger,” she said, her face as expressionless as ever. “That’s why I don’t laugh much.”

“I see,” I replied, nodding. So many things about Rushia made sense now. I turned to Mia. “Then you’re...”

“Hmm.” Without another word, Mia made a cut on her arm, revealing the same blue blood. “My lack of facial expressions is because I’ve always been a monster.”

“But what about all your otaku knowledge?”

“Even monsters watch anime, right?”

For real? I tilted my head, then turned back to Arisu. “Arisu, you are...”

“Oh, um, Kazu-san! I’ll be Rank 9 soon! My blood will turn blue! So, can you guys wait for me?”

In a state of panic, Arisu began to swing her spear with renewed vigor, cutting down orcs one after the other.

Seeing her fight with so much desperation, the rest of us couldn’t help but laugh.

And yet, my body felt so heavy. *Is the body of a monster always this heavy...?* I wondered.

As I lay there, the feeling of heaviness became more and more suffocating. A groan slipped from my lips as I roused from sleep.

Ah... it was just a dream. A horrible, terrifying dream.

Wait, why would monsters watch anime? That doesn't make sense, Mia. But there was no point in lecturing her, not over a dream.

Still, the weight seemed to press down on me. All my senses, still bleary from sleep, told me something was off. I couldn't afford to be unwell today, of all days. This was the day that could decide the fate of us all. Today there would be a decisive battle, one in which the lives of everyone at our school hung, on this continent, and in the entire world.

Marooned on the school's mountain, the five of us were cut off from Leen and her people's main force. The mountain was swarming with troops from Demon General Azagralith and his floating fortress. Even if we mounted a direct attack on the fortress, our chances of winning were slim. In this precarious situation, the last thing we needed was for me, the leader, to get sick. I would be worse than dead weight.

I felt guilt gnawing at me, but first, I needed to shake off this sleepiness.

With a grimace, I slowly opened my eyes—just to see Mia's face, only centimeters away. Apparently, she'd been sleeping on top of me.

"So, you're the cause of this heaviness!" I groaned, rolling her off me and sitting up. Mia squeaked like a startled frog, wrapped in the sheets.

Glancing around, I saw that it was just Mia and me in the room. The morning sun filtered in through the barred window, and I surmised that the others must already be up and about.

Mia made a sleepy "mmm" sound and climbed right back onto me, rubbing her cheek against my chest.

"You're awake, aren't you?" I murmured.

"Guilty as charged," she admitted, a hint of amusement in her tone. Mia lifted her face slightly to reveal the corners of her lips curled into a teasing smirk. She reached up and wrapped her arms around my neck. Although I welcomed her closeness, her chest remained disappointingly flat through her gym clothes.

"That's weird... Kazu doesn't seem aroused," she observed, a bit too casually for this early in the morning.

I immediately deflected, needing to hide my surprise. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“You were pretty cozy with Arisu last night, weren’t you?” Her voice contained a hint of accusation.

I clicked my tongue, feigning disapproval.

“Hmmm. That’s hardly appropriate for a member of the morals committee,” Mia remarked.

“Since when are you on the morals committee?”

“Since the beginning of first semester.”

Who in their right mind would put Mia on the morals committee? I wondered.

Then again, this was usually a role that got shoved onto someone who didn’t ask for it. And in our case, those who had forced it on her were likely no longer with us.

“I volunteered,” Mia added.

OK, never mind. “Why on earth would you do that?” I asked.

“Because it gets me access to information about things like property inspections.”

I laughed. This girl had a knack for smuggling contraband into school. But her next words caught me off guard.

“Hmm. But seriously, aren’t you going to take advantage of me here?”

“Uhh...”

“We don’t know if we’ll be around to see the sunrise tomorrow, do we?”

Her hand remained around the back of my neck; her face expressionless as she looked up at me. But her body was trembling.

Mia...

Her grip around my neck tightened just a little, just enough for me to sense her fear.

Of course, she's scared in a situation like this, I realized. It would be unnatural if she wasn't. I should've understood that sooner.

"It's okay," I assured her, putting as much certainty as I could muster into my voice and my smile as I gently stroked her head. "I don't plan on dying, and I'm *definitely* not going to let you die."

"Do you... really think we can win?"

"I do. So, Mia, you have to believe that we can win too. You have to follow me with the determination to win."

Mia studied me for a moment, like she was searching for any signs of deception or hesitation. Then she said, "Hmm. All right."

The petite girl nodded, a newfound resolve showing in her eyes, and I felt relief wash over me. If she had stayed pessimistic, it would not only have impacted the battle negatively, but also...

"So, promise me," she continued. "If we win, you'll make time for just the two of us tonight."

"Ah..."

"... Don't you want to?"

I gazed up at the ceiling in response.

"This is a reward. I need motivation to do my best."

"I understand. I promise... So have faith."

I stroked her hair comfortingly, and Mia closed her eyes and nodded in contentment.

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I prepared the small knife and made a shallow cut on the back of my hand. A small line of red blood seeped down toward my wrist.

"Ah, good."

Mia tilted her head, surprised by my reaction. “Continuing the contract ceremony?”

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing serious.”

But the suspicion didn’t leave Mia’s eyes.

“No, really, it’s not a big deal.”

I just had a really disturbing dream, and waking up was quite a struggle due to that heavy weight I felt... Could it be Mia’s fault, after all?

“What? Why are you staring at me like that?” Mia asked, more flustered than I could recall seeing her recently.

Just then we heard footsteps, coming from someone running up the stairs. The door burst open, and Tamaki jumped in, full of energy.

“Good morning, Kazu! I’m starving, so it’s about time for the banquet! Wait—why do you have a knife?”

“Ah, Tamaki. Can you do me a quick favor?”

“Uh, sure, what? Kazu, you look so serious! Why are you coming toward me with a knife?” Tamaki backed away step by step. “Hey, this is getting kind of scary!”

I quickly regained my senses. “Ah, no, that’s not it. I was just checking... my blood... It’s red.”

“Uhh... yeah. Of course it is. Blood is red.”

“Kazu... are you still half asleep?” For some reason, Mia’s gaze had turned icy.

Chapter 126: Reconnaissance of the Floating Fortress

At dawn on our fourth day in this otherworldly realm, an array of banquet dishes, courtesy of Summon Feast, was laid out on the table on the first floor of our hideout.

The spell could provide a nearly infinite variety of meals—from an abundance of mountain vegetables to an assortment of seafood, a selection focusing on meats, or a smorgasbord of sweets.

When I'd asked everyone what they wanted, Rushia immediately declared, "Sweets!" Her suggestion was respectfully ignored, and we'd decided on a seafood spread. But there were no raw dishes like sashimi; various kinds of fish were mainly steamed or grilled, generously paired with shellfish and seaweed. The aromatic spices lent the feast a delectable flavor that made it hard to put your fork down.

After stuffing ourselves with breakfast, we started getting ready to go. Not that there was much to prepare—our hideout didn't require any cleaning, and we'd brought minimal luggage. Essentially, getting ready meant deciding on our plan of action.

"First, we need information," I stated, summoning the usual raven familiar and using Remote Viewing to see through its eyes. The raven flew up into the dawn sky.

While I was reconnoitering, the girls were interrogating Arisu about last night's events.

"So, how was Kazu's attitude? Was he proactive, or..."

"N-No, it wasn't like that at all! I-I didn't..." Arisu stammered, trying desperately to deflect the questioning and maintain her denial. However, she was not good at keeping secrets, and Mia was a master of cunning conversation.

“But it’s good,” Tamaki interjected. “I’m glad Arisu was tied to us.”

I almost asked her if she was trying to play the mother-in-law card, but I held back, knowing that Tamaki sincerely wanted both Arisu and me to be happy—and that somewhere along the way, she hoped to find her own happiness too.

“So, Kazu, Arisu might say one thing, but what’s really going on?”

“Um, Kazu, next time, I kinda want to, um...”

“Stay focused,” I muttered, covering my ears with my hands.

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From the perspective of a raven soaring above the forest, I saw the mountainside where our school had once stood. Now, it looked like a war zone, so completely overrun by monsters that it looked like they had always been the masters of this place. Most were ogres, but a significant number were orcs. The gigantic bee was nowhere in sight; given it was early morning, maybe it was still tucked away deep in the forest.

Fifty meters above the middle school hovered the floating fortress, the one that had first shown up by the arts building when around fifty of us were there. Perhaps they still believed that was our main base and were waiting for us to come out. Then a thought struck me.

“What if the doppelgängers haven’t rendezvoused with the ogres yet?” I thought aloud. “What if the ogres don’t know about us?”

That would change everything. Maybe the doppelgängers had set out to join the ogres but had been intercepted by Mia and Tamaki before they could.

Mia had told our fellow students the assumed identities of the doppelgängers and that we were warping to where the Light Tribe lived.

This would have been indispensable to the doppelgängers. So, instead of updating their ogre allies, they would have gone straight to infiltrate the World Tree base, demolishing our teleportation device and cutting us off. But maybe it was too early to jump to conclusions.

“What does everyone think?” I asked the group, interrupting the ongoing interrogation of Arisu.

Rushia, who had been the least engaged in the gossip, spoke first. “You have a point, but assuming they don’t have any intel on us yet is probably too optimistic.”

“Right. There probably would’ve been a doppelgänger disguised as Shiba yesterday, riling up the survivors. In fact, there’s a chance that the one we defeated was disguised as him.”

We still didn’t know that much about what the doppelgängers could do. We’d only learned of their existence last night and only encountered one so far. *Can they change their appearance as often as they want? I wondered. And what does their true form look like?*

Many mysteries surrounded these creatures. Even the name “doppelgänger” had come from Mia. The nature of these beings might have been entirely different from what we understood.

“In a famous RPG I know, mythical creatures like Yamata-no-Orochi and Bostrol disguised themselves as figures like Himiko or a king,” Mia mentioned.

Oh, so there might be a chance of a magical variant like a Boss Ogre existing. I wonder if we can get our hands on something like the Mirror of Ra.

But, well, setting aside the Dragon Quest references...

As we talked, the raven familiar continued to soar over head, casting its eyes in every direction. I saw no signs of the surviving senior boys... but it was still early, so maybe they were sleeping somewhere. But then again, considering the massive number of ogres that had descended yesterday...

There was just as good a chance they had been annihilated.

While I wouldn’t exactly say “serves them right,” given their actions, it was hard to feel even a shred of sympathy.

After giving the ground one last scan, the raven flapped its wings, soaring up until it hovered above the floating fortress. Scouting the enemy stronghold was now our top priority.

As the familiar gained altitude, a verdant broadleaf forest stretched out across my field of vision. Trees stood closely packed, with their overlapping canopies obstructing the view of the ground below, but I caught glimpses of ogres walking through the gaps in the trees.

Other ogres, possibly sentries, were standing on the edge of the island, facing outward.

I wished I could spot Azagralith, but there was no way the boss would make it that easy for us.

I had instructed the rest of the team to storm in if there was a castle or a fortress somewhere on the island, but unfortunately, I didn't see such a building. Would it be hidden?

Or maybe the monsters didn't see the value in having a castle at all. After all, it didn't seem like them to flaunt their power in this way. They were more like summoned familiars, and Azagralith seemed to have formed some kind of exclusive contract with the demon king.

This was all based on assumptions. There was so much we didn't know. At least we could be honest about that; it's always better to know what you don't know.

Another thought crept in, though I didn't want it to.

What exactly is that thing that's bigger than an elephant and tramping slowly through the forest?

The word *dinosaur* flashed across my mind.

It was a massive four-legged creature, its entire body covered in reptilian scales. It must have been over ten meters long, and its tall, giraffe-like neck occasionally peeked out from the gaps in the tree canopy. Its glowing red eyes confirmed it was a monster. And as I looked on, I saw that there was not just one, but at least two of those creatures strolling around. From the confident, unhurried way they walked, it was clear they knew they were at the top of the food chain.

I made a mental note to ask Rushia about the dinosaur things later. The raven made a wide turn, turning away from the floating fortress toward the

mountain...

And then I noticed a bird approaching in the distance. It was a hawk, and it seemed to notice my raven instantly, staring deep into its eyes...

Ah, of course, I thought. It's Leen's familiar. She's sent a new one as a backup. Good. Now, I just have to guide that hawk properly...

I breathed a sigh of relief. However, at that very moment, a beam of light shot up from below, piercing straight through the hawk.

"What—?"

The next instant, my vision shook wildly. The raven was plummeting.

At the edge of my sight, I saw an ogre, its hand raised toward the sky.

The skin of the ogre was dyed pitch black. It had a single horn and was about three meters tall, like the others, but it radiated an intimidating aura that made me shiver uncontrollably, even as far away as I was.

I couldn't make out the ogre's facial expression, but one thing was clear: its strength was on a different level from any ogre we'd encountered before.

This might sound like something out of a manga, but I felt as though I could see the aura surrounding that ogre. As if the very air around it had a different quality to it...

This one is bad news, I thought with a plummeting feeling in my gut. Seriously bad news.

It's no use. As long as this thing is around, no matter how many familiars Leen sends, we can't get closer to the mountain.

Just before the raven hit the ground, I severed the link. Filling my lungs with ragged, gasping breaths, I collapsed onto the floor.

"Kazu-san!" Arisu cried, rushing over to support me.

"I'm all right. Just... got startled, that's all."

Tamaki handed me a cup of water. I drained it in one go and wiped my mouth, giving everyone a nod to show I was OK.

"Azagralith was there," I said simply.



Chapter 127: The Phantom Wolf King Sha-Lau

The state of the ruined school, the floating fortress, Leen's hawk, the ogre general Azagralith—I told them everything I'd seen up there. I even told them how the jet-black ogre had killed both the hawk and the raven. Unless we dealt with him, Leen's familiars would never reach us.

"Do you think he knows that Leen's hawk and your raven are familiars?" Arisu asked curiously.

"Hmm, not sure. But maybe we should assume he does," I said, nodding.

Maybe he just shoots down birds for fun, I thought. No, that's unlikely. Zapping two familiars in a row like that, he must've known something was up. We should always assume that the enemy knows what they're doing. And if they don't, that's all the better for us.

"Leen will definitely send out another familiar," Rushia said. "She'll probably redirect a hawk that was headed somewhere else." There was a slight hint of pride or confidence on her usually expressionless face.

"Then the issue is, they might realize we still have the capability to send out scouts to the mountain."

"True. But our plan of action doesn't change. This is guerrilla warfare."

"We need to move flexibly, while annihilating the ogres positioned at the mountain's front."

I nodded in agreement with Rushia. Staying here to defend our base was out of the question. We were at a numerical disadvantage, and above all, that fortress cannon on the floating fortress was terrifying. Maybe a Greater Ninja could've deflected its fire, but I had neither the perceptive abilities nor reflexes to handle something like that. All we could hope to do was move around and hope we didn't get hit.

Always keep the enemy off balance, and be the ones to set the pace of the battle, I thought. Or... keep sniping and don't let them see where we are. Those are our only options.

“On top of that, we need to check the information in Yuuki-senpai’s notes,” I told the group. “Make sure it’s really him who wrote that, and if we can use it, awesome. If it’s not helpful, we meet back up in the White Room to reevaluate.”

“That sounds good. At this point, there’s no use thinking beyond that,” one of the girls chimed in, and everyone nodded in agreement.

By the time we packed our meager belongings and stepped out of the temporary hideout, the sun was just peeking over the horizon.

I was relieved to know we still had plenty of time, and I decided to ask Rushia about the dinosaur-like monsters I’d seen.

“It’s probably Terrasaur Agnamu,” she said. “A divine-class monster... I’ve heard they’re really good at Earth Magic.”

“I’ve never heard of Azagralith having a Terrasaur Agnamu as a pet...” I mused. *Seriously, keeping a divine-class monster as a pet? How OP is this ogre boss?*

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This time, I summoned two familiars: the Invisible Scout and the Phantom Wolf King Sha-Lau, with whom I’d just formed an exclusive contract last night. Sha-Lau was treated as a Rank 9 familiar, which meant summoning him cost me 81 MP.

In response to my call, a wolf appeared—much larger than a regular gray wolf... No, this guy was even bigger than a horse, boasting a shining coat of silver fur and large, gentle blue eyes that seemed to draw me into his gaze.

“I am here in accordance with our contract, Master. Command me as you wish.” Sha-Lau’s voice echoed directly inside our heads, just like yesterday—a kind of telepathy that was one of his unique powers.

“Wow, so fluffy!” And just like yesterday, Mia was the first to pounce on the Phantom Wolf King. The magnificent animal didn’t even flinch, letting Mia stroke his silver fur.

“Sha-Lau, I was wondering, would it be possible for all five of us to ride on your back?”

“It is possible, Master. However, if you wish to fight while riding me, saddles will be necessary.”

Oh, right. We’d be thrown off otherwise. And do any of us even have riding experience...?

Rushia raised her hand. “I’ve been trained to ride and fight bareback.”

Well, that didn’t surprise me at all, given Rushia’s background. Nonetheless, it wouldn’t have done any good for only Rushia to ride Sha-Lau.

“Let’s keep that option on hold for now,” I said. “Let’s send the Invisible Scout ahead and carefully head back to the school on foot.”

It would be quite troubling if any encountered monsters got away and conveyed our location to the enemy army. Our aim should be to eliminate any enemies on sight, which was why I wanted the Invisible Scout with us. I figured it would be well worth the additional 64 MP. And so, I cast basic enhancement spells on everyone, and we set off. The Phantom Wolf King Sha-Lau walked leisurely beside me, and Mia kept touching his rich fur, her face enraptured.

“Do you want to ride him?” I asked.

“Mm, not now. No time to play around.”

“You understand our situation pretty well, huh?” I said, impressed.

“I mean, I do try to be the annoying character, but I’d rather not draw too much hate.”

“Sometimes I really don’t understand what you’re saying...” I said, shaking my head.

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Sha-Lau and Arisu had had a mock battle the night before, and I was pretty confident in my guess that he was on par with a Rank 7 weapon wielder in terms of combat ability.

Arisu had managed a narrow victory with her skillful positioning, and she'd looked back at me with this big, triumphant grin, almost like she was asking aloud for me to praise her. If she'd had a tail like the Light People, I was sure she would've been wagging it with all her might. I couldn't help but laugh, wondering who the real dog was.

Upon seeing this, Sha-Lau had remarked, "Mocking the woman you love might not be the wisest approach." The phantom wolf sure knew how to hit where it hurt. He was definitely a smooth operator.

Sha-Lau's prowess wasn't limited to melee combat. According to him, before becoming a familiar, he was adept at manipulating an astonishing seven thousand types of magic. However, now that he was bound to me, it seemed he was limited to only around a hundred spells, and even if he had Rank 9 Summoning Magic, there were restrictions on what he could do. If I wanted to unlock more of his potential, I might need to venture into advanced summoning; I figured I would look into this next time I was in the White Room.

Still, a hundred spells was a lot, and I'd asked Sha-Lau for a rough idea of his specialties. He said he was mainly skilled in physical enhancement and Illusion Magic. Even now, he said, he could use both at a decent level.

Unfortunately, in Illusion Magic, there were certain spells we wouldn't be able to unlock, no matter how much we developed our skills. For instance, there was a spell that allowed him to change his *perceived* appearance. Unlike the doppelgänger, which actually transformed physically, Sha-Lau's Disguise Image spell changed merely the image that others saw. For example, he could make himself look like a cute puppy, but if you touched him, you would still feel the large wolf he was. He explained that in the past, he had also been capable of full transformation spells like the doppelgängers used.

Another useful spell was a forest-specific spell called "Maze," which turned the forest into a labyrinth and confused anyone who went in.

Hmm, if we'd had this magic yesterday, the battle against the Arachnae might have gone in our favor.

There was "Shadow Mirror," which Sha-Lau could cast to create an illusionary double of himself. Using this in conjunction with self-invisibility magic would be quite effective, I thought. By cleverly utilizing these tricks, one could potentially achieve better results than even Arisu in combat.

Sha-Lau had mentioned he could also wield lightning-based attack magic; however, he felt he was stronger in hand-to-hand combat. As for Healing Magic, another of Arisu's skills, he could use it to an extent, but not the kind that could quickly heal severe injuries during battle. It seemed to be more of the type that gradually closed wounds over several minutes. Even so, having any Healing Magic was always a plus. It could serve as insurance just in case Arisu and Rushia fell in battle.

There were a plethora of utility spells, which one might call Life Magic, but I wouldn't go into detail. They were handy for things like drying wet fur or exterminating pesky ticks, but none of them seemed useful for our current needs.

Aside from his magical abilities, Sha-Lau's five senses were said to be far superior to humans'. Of course, wolves naturally had excellent hearing and smell, but Sha-Lau also possessed what he called "super vision."

"In essence," the wolf had explained, "super vision is the ability to see the flow of mana. By detecting the fluctuations of mana, one can identify entities hiding through invisibility or similar means."

So that's why the Legend Arachne was able to see our Invisible Scout coming, I thought. Wish I'd known that sooner.

Chapter 128: The Way of the Familiar

“Sha-Lau, are there many beings like you with super vision?”

“It depends on what one considers many or few. However, superior life-forms often possess sensing abilities beyond the standard five senses. Without them, they would be at a significant disadvantage against their peers, making survival in competition challenging.”

Ah, that makes sense. By that standard, we humans are at a pretty big disadvantage... At the moment, I was the only one in the group who could use See Invisibility.

“Can you help us any more with a strategy for these kinds of advanced battles?” I asked.

“In my present state, delving deep into some of that knowledge is a challenge. Master, you and your comrades haven’t yet achieved the power necessary to grasp those realms fully.”

“But we need to be prepared! We have to become as strong as possible; otherwise, there’s no way we’ll survive today.”

Walking at a measured pace, Sha-Lau paused, closing his eyes briefly before responding, “I see.” He then recounted tales of battles beyond our imagination: standard counter-magic against search spells, instant-death magic with its lethal consequences and counteractions, and monsters possessing powers akin to instant death, such as paralysis and petrification. The information was invaluable. Encountering such potent adversaries wasn’t on my wish list, but we couldn’t let fear paralyze us.

“On another note, it seems your Invisible Scout is on its way back,” Sha-Lau said in a casual display of his superior senses. True to his words, about ten seconds later, a report from the Invisible Scout came in.

“It’s the enemy. Three ogres and seven orcs. They might not be a significant force, but we’ll eliminate them all.”

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The battle went just as we’d planned. Sha-Lau swung wide to approach the monsters from behind, launching a preemptive strike that took the enemy completely by surprise.

The orcs panicked, wildly swinging their weapons. The ogres bravely tried to counter, but they were too disoriented to fight effectively. Eventually, the orcs began to flee, and Arisu and Tamaki skillfully began to take them down, with Mia and Rushia finishing off any that they missed.

Meanwhile, Sha-Lau dealt with the ogres, who were no match for him. I watched as he tore into one ogre’s shoulder with his sharp fangs and slashed its neck with his claws. Just then, Arisu leveled up.

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In the White Room, we reviewed our strategy once more. After that...

“Kazu-san.” Rushia was staring at me with a serious expression. “Can you give us some sweets?”

“O-Okay,” I said, startled by the intensity of her request. “Just stay calm...”

I used the Summon Feast spell, but this time I chose the tea party version. The next second, a banquet table appeared, filled with cakes, cookies, and other treats. Freshly brewed tea emitted a soft trail of steam.

Rushia ate until she felt satisfied, and Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia enjoyed the sweets, too.

Just watching the scene made me feel like I was going to have heartburn. I mean, we’d just had breakfast! How could they eat so much so soon?

“It’s simple, Kazu-san. You don’t gain weight no matter how much you eat in this room,” Arisu said in perfect seriousness.

“Don’t worry, Arisu, I’ll still love you even if you gain weight.”

“There’s no need to worry about that!” Arisu said angrily.

That’s fine, I thought. Eat till you’re satisfied. After all, MP in this room is practically infinite.

Minutes later, Mia and Tamaki were holding their stomachs and groaning.

“Ugh, this feels... uncomfortable.”

“Ngh... I know. I can’t take it anymore.”

You two just stuffed yourselves because you could, didn’t you?

This was definitely not the proper way to use the White Room.

“So, Arisu,” I said,” trying to distract myself. “You’re going to raise your Spearmanship to Rank 8, right?”

“Yeah. I think that would make me more useful.”

Honestly, I would rather she improved her Healing Magic to enhance our safety, but she seemed determined, so I respected her choice. The enemy had several divine-class soldiers, so we could never have too much attack power. Besides, Arisu excelled in combat.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 26	SPEARMANSHIP: 7→8
HEALING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 9→1

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Immediately after we returned from the White Room, Sha-Lau pounced on the surviving ogre as it tried to flee, dragging it down and delivering the finishing blow.

With that, all our enemies had been annihilated, and the first familiar I'd formed an exclusive contract with had made me very proud.

This is an amazing find, I thought. If this were a draft, Sha-Lau would be first-pick material, with all twelve teams competing for him.

As I was thinking this, Sha-Lau, who returned to stand next to us, wrinkled his nose with a puzzled look. "Master, I find it curious..."

"Yeah? What about?"

"Why did they emit a scent of being full, even if it was for just a moment?"

Wow... can he really tell that much with just his sense of smell?

"What happens in the White Room shouldn't be reflected in this world... But maybe their minds hadn't switched back fully right when we came back here," I guessed.

Actually, until that moment, I'd believed there was no lag between the White Room and this world and that our brain chemicals would follow suit... but maybe that assumption was wrong.

"The White Room is indeed a peculiar place," Sha-Lau murmured in wonder. "Could it be a place prepared by a being beyond the ordinary? I'm curious."

I felt the same way. *What kind of entity could create the White Room and give us all these skills? And what does this entity want from us?*

"Sha-Lau, you mentioned waiting for a prophecy about the end of the world, right?"

"Yes, Master."

When we had formed our exclusive contract, upon seeing me, he said he'd been waiting for years and years for that moment, waiting to be summoned.

"A long time ago, a great being, now unknown to anyone, whispered that my true master would appear when the end of the world was prophesied. For such a vague reason... I have always felt a thirst, a longing. Now, it has been fulfilled."

I shivered as I recalled our conversation. So, this entity had whispered to and guided Sha-Lau... It was concerning. Eerie, even.

Ever since coming to this world, I hadn't been able to shake the feeling that we were being played like puppets on strings.

Is there someone somewhere watching our struggles and laughing at us? I wondered, but I tried not to focus on that.

"Don't overthink it. In time, the truth will reveal itself."

I wanted to believe someone was out there.

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We continued through the forest, from the backside of the mountain toward the front, where the school was.

The next group we encountered was composed solely of ogres—five of them. This was only half the size of a typical group, so perhaps they were split up for scouting.

According to the Invisible Scout who had discovered them, there were no other ogres nearby, so it was an easy decision to attack.

This time, Tamaki and Arisu charged in, and Sha-Lau held back any ogres attempting to flee. Rushia and Mia then dealt the finishing blows.

After we'd defeated four of them, I leveled up.

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"Come to think of it..." Mia said, rushing over to the Mia Vendor as soon as we'd appeared in the White Room. "Hmm. Just like I thought. They've added more to the display."

Ah, right, the vendor's offerings. I haven't really checked it in a while.

We all took a moment to carefully examine each item available at the Mia Vendor. Among the new additions, one skill looked particularly important: Familiar Awakening.

"This special ability... Is it made especially for exclusive contracts?"

“It costs 2,000 tokens... The same amount you need for Mana Release.”

At that moment, we had a bit over 1,600 tokens on hand. But if we took down some ogres, we’d have enough to purchase it in no time. After all, Sha-Lau had mentioned that my current summoning restricted his powers...

I decided to check the FAQ. I learned the following:

- Familiar Awakening is a special ability that unlocks the original power of a summoned creature. For weaker familiars, whether they’re standard summons or under exclusive contracts, the ability might not make much difference. However, for someone like Sha-Lau, it would be a perfect fit.
- Using Familiar Awakening comes at a cost. The summoner can increase the maintenance MP of the familiar at any given rate. The more MP consumed, the closer the familiar’s abilities would be to their original state. I had summoned Sha-Lau using 81 MP; by spending an additional 81, 162, or 243 MP, I could draw out even more of his power. The MP consumption was a little steep, but if I wanted to unleash more of his strength, it would be a necessary sacrifice.
- The duration of the spell’s effect is ten seconds per user level. With my recent advancement to Level 31, I could maintain Sha-Lau’s awakened state for 300 seconds, or five minutes.
- I sighed as I took in all this new information. The world of summoning was more complex than I’d ever imagined.
- Once Familiar Awakening expires, the awakened familiar will be forcibly returned.

Does it overheat or something? All things considered, this skill comes with quite a bit of risk.

“But the moment we can afford it, we should buy it,” Mia stated firmly, more determined than usual.

“Are you sure? Rushia has the Mana Release skill, and it might be useful for you too,” I pointed out.

“Wind and Earth Magic don’t have the firepower that Rushia’s Fire Magic does,” she countered. “With our enemies getting stronger every day, increasing our offensive capabilities should be a top priority. So, removing the limiter sounds like the more promising option.”

Unleashing the full potential, huh?

Well, I couldn’t deny the logic of her argument. Depending on how much power we could tap into, this might be one of our best options to bolster our combat capabilities.

Chapter 129: The Ninja’s Secret Room

It became clear that we needed to gather more tokens—and fast.

“Shall we check out the hidden token location Yuuki-senpai’s memo talked about?” I mused. Yuuki had stashed away gemstones dropped by monsters for emergencies. He probably hadn’t anticipated this exact situation, but... he probably also hadn’t really believed that the surviving kids from the high school would rally under his banner.

“My brother never really trusted many people, you know?” Mia had said once, and I’d often wondered if she felt the same way.

I wonder... does Mia trust me? Judging from her attitude so far, I would like to think she does... Argh, my negativity again. This is one of my weak points. I shook my head and tapped the keys to exit the White Room.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 31	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 2

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Back in the forest, we quickly dispatched the final ogre and collected the gemstones. I counted 1,636 tokens.

So, we’re short by just about four hundred before we can get Familiar Awakening...

According to the memo, there was an abandoned house located southeast of the high school, marked by a signpost from the paved mountain road, which

was big enough for trucks. The basement of that house served as the Ninja Club’s hidden clubhouse.

After descending the mountain, we veered off to the east, making our way directly to the abandoned house. On the way, we were surprised by a lone orc, but we fortunately beat it, and the victory allowed Rushia to level up. We decided to save her skill points and keep going.

RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 20	FIRE MAGIC: 8
SKILL POINTS: 4	

Later, we faced more groups of ogres: two trios and then a quartet of them. As a result of these battles, both Tamaki and Mia gained a level.

In the White Room, our group gathered to discuss the allocation of Tamaki’s six Skill Points. “Shouldn’t we distribute them now?” I suggested, then realized she should be the one deciding, and told her so.

Tamaki raised an eyebrow. “Why not you, Kazu? If you say the word, I’ll dive into any danger.”

I chuckled. “Even if I asked you to meet your end?”

“In a heartbeat,” she shot back with a playful grin.

I sighed, shaking my head in amusement. “Your bravery is commendable, Tamaki. But promise me no reckless heroics, especially for my sake.”

The day before, after a thorough discussion, we’d pinpointed all the advanced skills derived from combining basic ones. For instance, merging Swordsmanship and Strength at Rank 9 yielded Freeform Swordsmanship. Pairing Swordsmanship with Healing Magic birthed Sacred Swordsmanship, while combining it with Reconnaissance led to Assassin’s Blade. Interestingly, integrating Swordsmanship with Water Magic simply produced Water Swordsmanship.

By now, Water Magic was the only type of magic none of us had explored. But after much debate, we agreed it wasn't essential at the moment.

First off, I never planned on fighting underwater. If something like that came up, I'd rather have someone else take the lead. But we figured we would revisit the topic when we met up with the Light Tribe. And if we were in a pinch, Rushia could always learn some Water Magic. Speaking of Rushia, I was still undecided about her other skill. One thing was for sure, though: she needed to boost her Fire Magic to Rank 9 as soon as possible.

As for Tamaki, if we focused on building her Strength, she would be on the path to becoming a heavy sword expert. Having someone besides Arisu who could use Healing Magic would be a big plus. But they didn't both need to be on the front lines, and it didn't feel like we were spreading our risks enough.

So, it boils down to either strength or agility, heavy swordplay or flexible swordplay.

"You know, Tamaki's more of a muscle type," Mia commented, pretty much saying what I had been thinking.

Tamaki chuckled. "I guess I do prefer a straight-up fight rather than overthinking things."

She's really something, I thought, nodding as I made my decision.

"Tamaki, focus on building up your Strength. Aim for heavy swordplay."

"Got it! I'm on it!" In no time, Tamaki poured her Skill Points into her Strength, shooting it up to Rank 3. Meanwhile, Mia was saving up her points, looking to max out her Wind Magic at Rank 9 soon.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 26	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 1→3	SKILL POINTS: 6→1

Mia	
LEVEL: 26	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC: 8	SKILL POINTS: 6

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Once we left the White Room, we were soon finishing off the remaining ogres. Then, guided by the Invisible Scout, we continued forward. Perhaps it was because we'd descended a bit from the mountain, but there were many fewer ogres as we kept walking. In their place, we started encountering stray orcs, wandering alone or in pairs. They may have been deserters, but we couldn't just let them roam free, so we took down every one we saw.

After dealing with about seven orcs, we arrived at a stone pillar—the same one I'd seen on our second night. Standing between two and three meters tall, it showed an odd red pattern at eye level, something like coiled snakes. I remembered from before that this pattern was a form of writing and, with the Read Language spell, it had translated to “Coordinate Fixation, Spatial Investigation, Limited Scope.” But we still had absolutely no idea what the pillar was for or what these words meant.

“This is what you mentioned yesterday...” Rushia trailed off, her gaze fixed intently on the pillar. She touched the red pattern, closed her eyes, and murmured something under her breath. After a moment, she sighed, opened her eyes, and pulled her hand away.

“Did you figure something out?” I asked.

“All I can tell is that the spell written here is ancient,” she replied.

“Ancient?” *What does that mean? Could this tell us something about whoever made this pillar?*

“Judging by the strong mana presence, I believe this might be a relic from the age of the gods,” Rushia said.

“The age of the gods... Right, in this world, that’s what ‘ancient’ implies, yeah?”

To us, “ancient” usually meant something inferior, weak, or outdated. It brought to mind eras like the coal age, the medieval period, or—even further back—the stone age. Of course, not everything from the past is obsolete. However, in this world, there was a time, long ago, when gods roamed and even more powerful magic existed. Adjusting to the nuances of this fantasy world, its quirks and wonders, was proving even more challenging than I’d expected.

I turned to Sha-Lau. “Any insights on this?”

“Given the gathering of orcs around here,” Sha-Lau began, “it’s likely they were drawn by the mana emanating from this stone pillar.”

“Like moths to a flame?” Mia chimed in.

“Can orcs even sense mana?” I wondered aloud.

“Most likely, but probably on a subconscious level,” Sha-Lau said. “Certain monsters react reflexively to the power of mana, the very essence of their being.”

So, it’s like the mana leaking out smells enticing to them.

“The response varies depending on the creature’s standing in the world,” the Wolf King went on. “But generally, monsters that act mostly on instinct show such reactions.”

So, orcs are basically like wild beasts? Although, to me, they seem even dumber than most animals.

“Rushia, do you know if something would happen if we destroyed this?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you that would be safe,” she replied cautiously.

“What about controlling it, or maybe trying to learn more about it?”

Rushia shook her head. “If we had Leen with us, that might be possible.”

“Well, we can’t really spend more time researching right now,” I concluded, and we decided to head for the dilapidated house—the hideout of our senior, Yuuki.

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It was about twenty minutes later, after we’d taken down three more ogres and eight orcs, that we stumbled upon a nearly collapsed old house. So, this was the ninja’s hideout...

The basement looked just as Yuuki’s note had described, and we followed the steps to disarm the trap, revealing a small room behind it. The room was meticulously organized and surprisingly dry for a basement. I lit up the room with a flashlight.

On a small round table, next to a bag filled with jewels, was a note. It read: *“If Kazu-sama is reading this, I’m so sorry. ≡”*

“Sorry?” I muttered, looking up from the note and scanning the room. Then, it hit me. “Ah... I see.” I sighed and shook my head, a wry smile forming on my face. “I really can’t beat this guy.”

Arisu looked puzzled. “Umm... Kazu-san, what’s going on?”

I can’t blame her for being confused. But how am I supposed to explain this?

On the wall hung a suit jacket, and there was at least one wig, with various other disguises scattered about.

“Why the disguise gear? Kazu, do you know what my brother was up to with this stuff?” Mia asked, just as baffled as Arisu.

“Yeah, I have a rough idea,” I replied.

“Is it something that would make me want to punch my brother?” Mia prodded.

“Maybe... I’ll fill you in later, maybe in the White Room.” Explaining it here and now would take too long.

I gathered only what we absolutely needed from the small room, not really wanting to spend longer there than we had to. Of course, this included the jewels on the table, which happened to total exactly five hundred tokens.

Chapter 130: The Ninja Battles Behind Everyday Life

After leaving the dilapidated house, I sent the Invisible Scout on a reconnaissance mission. It wasn't long before they spotted a small unit composed of two orcs and an archer orc. We headed in their direction and swiftly eliminated them. Arisu leveled up. Time for the White Room.

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"Now then, Kazu," Mia began, puffing out her chest and tilting her chin defiantly, her eyes fixed on me with a stern glare. "I think it's time you spill everything you know."

She seems eager for an explanation. I get it, but...

"What I've come to realize is basically about your brother's... dubious activities."

"I'm sorry. I was out of line," Mia replied, bowing deeply in a flash. "Please, feel free to step on me."

"Tamaki, do the honors," I suggested.

"I've got you, Kazu-san!" Tamaki playfully left a shoe imprint on the back of Mia's gym uniform. Given that there would be no trace of it once we left the White Room, there was no need for restraint.

"How's that, Mia-chan? Feeling good?" Tamaki teased.

"Ahh, being stepped on feels amazing!" Mia replied with mock ecstasy.

Amidst their lighthearted exchange, Arisu turned to me, wearing a bemused expression. "So, Kazu-san, what did you find out?"

I laughed, wanting to keep the mood light. "Where do I even begin? To cut to the chase, it seems I've been dancing in Yuuki-senpai's palm this entire time," I began.

“Wait... Kazu-san, by ‘this entire time’... How long do you mean?” Arisu asked, a hint of concern in her voice.

“Maybe a month? There’s a chance that even my decision to kill Shiba was orchestrated by him,” I admitted.

Mia, who had been sprawled out on the floor, jerked her head up with a startled “Huh?”

“I didn’t mention it before because it didn’t seem like it mattered. But my revenge against Shiba wasn’t entirely my own doing. Once in a while, I would talk with a salesman who came to our school. He shared some things with me. Even the gasoline—he secretly supplied it. Without his help, I doubt I could’ve kept everything secret.”

Mia and Arisu seemed to be following my story. Tamaki? Well, she looked lost, but that was pretty standard for her. Rushia was understandably out of the loop—she probably didn’t even know what a *salesman* was.

“So, Kazu-san, this salesman... was it Yuuki-senpai?” Arisu inquired, piecing the puzzle together.

“There was a suit and wig in that basement, remember? I think those were Yuuki-senpai’s disguises. I realized I haven’t seen his real face recently—not yesterday, and not even the day before,” I mused.

Mia sprang up, an epiphany lighting up her face. “Oh! I wondered why he was wearing that mask when we met yesterday.”

Let’s not call it a mask, I thought, but she was right. Every time I’d met him, he was disguised.

“We might have genuinely crossed paths the first time. But afterward, even with a bit of a disguise, he probably thought I’d recognize him if I saw his face. So, he never revealed it to me,” I deduced.

“Wow, so there was a reason behind that mask. Truly ninja-like,” Tamaki said admiringly. While I wasn’t sure what exactly she found so impressive, once you put everything together, it all made simple sense.

“Ugh. Kazu-kun, I’m so sorry for the trouble my brother’s caused,” Mia said with a sigh.

“It’s fine, Mia. I’m not bothered at all. Either way, I needed to have the resolve to kill Shiba. If I hadn’t, he would’ve killed me instead. And thanks to my preparations, I got to Level 1. Everything’s come full circle to this moment.”

Yeah, Yuuki-senpai certainly guided my thoughts. He pretended to be an outsider visiting the school and listened to my tale of woe. He offered me a bit of advice and assistance.

As I reflected further on it, I realized he had probably found Shiba extremely bothersome. Maybe he’d always wanted to dismantle the narrow-minded faction Shiba had been building. And to do that, he’d used me. Even if he was certain his actions would lead to my downfall, he still set the plan in motion.

Was it cruel of him? Yes. He wasn’t necessarily a good person. What he did was reprehensible. But back then, I’d been in a dire situation. Whether I advanced or retreated, it felt like hell. What Yuuki did, in the end, had become a beacon for me.

So, isn’t that fine? It was a win-win situation. I was just too oblivious to realize it.

“Kazu, are you a big shot or something?”

“I’m just being pragmatic. If I hadn’t been, I wouldn’t have survived.”

“Mm, true. But what my brother did was just too cruel,” Mia said, her fist clenched tightly.

“Next time I see him, I’ll beat him to a pulp.”

“Just make sure you don’t kill him.”

“That’s why we need to get out of here quickly, Kazu.”

“Of course. We’ll go over the details soon.”

We began to lay out the various gear we’d brought from the ninja hideout on the floor of the White Room. While lighters, matches, and preserved foods were to be expected, there were a few items that made us wonder why they were even there.

One of them, something that looked like clay, made everyone except Rushia sigh deeply.

However, there was a note that explained everything about it, including handling instructions. Starting with “Simple even for amateurs!” Yuuki’s instructions were very clear indeed.

The one with the most vacant expression was Mia. “C-4... A plastic explosive... Where did my brother get something like this? And why would he even...?”

I get it. It’s hard to digest that a family member has what can only be described as terrorist equipment.

To be fair, I was feeling a bit drained, too. I used to say that Mia and Yuuki were alike, but I realized I needed to correct that. There was something fundamentally off about him.

“So, according to the note, this plastic explosive can be used as fuel, too.”

“Mm. Nobody would go to the black market to get something like that just to use it as fuel. Especially when there’s a remote detonator included. He was clearly planning to set it off.”

“Exactly.”

Rushia still looked puzzled, so I tried to explain to her what C-4 was.

“A delayed fire spell... So it’s like an explosion box?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah. It’s more convenient, but as for power... I wonder which is stronger.”

“Why are you looking at me, Kazu?” Mia asked.

“I thought maybe you’d know more about the specifics of this.”

Unfortunately, the petite girl shook her head. “What kind of military knowledge are you expecting from a girl in her first year of middle school?”

“Well, it’s rare to find such a person with such a wealth of... let’s say, ‘romantic’ knowledge.”

“Oh, that’s from puberty.”

I wonder if that’s a valid excuse.

“Do you think he might’ve gotten this, always having the intention to give it to me?” I asked.

“That’s entirely possible.”

Blowing up Shiba... That might have been an enticing proposal in its own right. However, I decided not to think too much about where he’d gotten the C-4 from.

“Given our current abilities, magic would be much more efficient and convenient than this stuff.”

“The Explosion Box has more versatility, though, right?” Rushia asked.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Let’s just think of it as being at that level.”

For the moment, that’s how all modern weapons would be for us. Even if we had found a machine gun instead, our reaction would probably have been the same.

If someone else were to use it, I thought, that would be a different story...

“The real issue is this USB memory stick,” Arisu said. “With the Cultural Arts Center blown up, we’re in a bind.”

The USB drive she referred to was labeled “confidential.” And she was right; the laptop in this room was too old to have a USB port, and we had no other way to access its contents. But when Shiki and the others had escaped to the World Tree, they were supposed to have taken a few laptops...

Do we need to get one from somewhere?

“Mia, your computer is...”

“It was in the CAC...”

Of course. There would have been no point in leaving it in the girls’ dorm.

And the CAC was obliterated by a fortress cannon. The laptop’s probably been turned into dust.

“Should we check the boys’ or girls’ dorms at the high school? Or maybe if your brother left one in the principal’s office in the main school building...”

“The main school building was blown up, too...”

“Oh, right, I forgot. So, the dorms? I hope they haven’t become lairs for the ogres.”

“Chances are slim they haven’t.”

Mia groaned. “So do we forget about it?”

“That’s one option, but...”

Yuuki-senpai went out of his way to leave this for us. There’s a good chance it has information that could be useful to us.

“You mean that old computer here in the White Room, right? But what good would it do?”

“I checked it out, but it’s so old it doesn’t even have a USB slot.”

“So, it’s like... we don’t have the right key?”

“In a way, yeah.” I nodded as Rushia worked to understand our situation.

“In that case, why not use the Invisible Scout for recon?” she suggested.

That was a great idea. I decided we would share the scout’s perspective, have it peek into every room, and then give specific instructions once it returned. Even if we managed to get our hands on a laptop, it would probably have a dead battery. But could we use the backup power in the basement to charge it?

Our general strategy seemed clear. Then there was...

“That huge space he talked about beneath the high school?”

Mia was referring to the note she’d received from her brother the day before, which hinted at a strangely vast space beneath the grounds where we’d confronted the ogre squad. Yuuki had instructed us to investigate it, even providing details about how to get in.

“But we’re short on time,” Mia continued, “so we should do both at once. Arisu and I will head to the secret basement.”

“Invisible mode? But if the two of you run into trouble...”

“That’s why I picked Arisu. She’s cautious.”

Arisu gave a wry smile, while Tamaki looked puzzled. “But wouldn’t I be more useful in a fight? Is Healing Magic really that necessary?”

“Tamaki... I really adore you, you know.”

“Wh-What? Kazu, you’re so random!” Tamaki blushed. I couldn’t help myself and affectionately stroked her head. The silly girl squinted in delight.

“She’s so easily flustered,” Mia muttered. That was unnecessary.

Arisu decided to save her Skill Points, and we headed back to the other world.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 27	SPEARMANSHIP: 8
HEALING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 3

Chapter 131: Beneath the Ground

Once Arisu and Mia left, Tamaki, Rushia, and I headed back to the abandoned house, which seemed like the safest place to do our recon using my familiar and Remote Viewing.

When we got there, I sent back the Phantom Wolf King, Sha-Lau. It was too cramped inside the house, and he'd stick out like a sore thumb if he waited outside. While Tamaki and Rushia stood watch, I sat down on the first floor and started giving instructions to the Invisible Scout.

The transparent monster leaped out of the house, sprinting through the forest. There were no signs of ogres or orcs at the high school. Had they withdrawn?

It was possible. They might have realized quite a while ago that there were no students left here, and there would have been no need to leave any troops. On the other hand, they might be bluffing, lurking somewhere and waiting for us to carelessly approach.

I hope Mia and Arisu are doing okay.

The Invisible Scout entered the special classroom building first, a little away from the main school building, through a broken window. It walked down the hall following the map I'd taught it, and began by peeking into the computer room.

As expected, there was nothing. Yuuki's group had probably taken it all when they left, or maybe the group from the boys' dorm had taken it earlier. What we did know was that if anyone happened to have access to electricity in this world, that would be extremely valuable to us.

The Invisible Scout continued to look in other potential places: the audio-visual room, the general study room... Of course, the Scout had no concept of a computer, so I'd just told it to slowly pan its vision around and to look inside any piles of equipment or cabinets it found.

“How’s it going, Kazu?”

“It’s not looking good at all,” I responded with disappointment.

Tamaki sighed in sympathy. But there was still another building left to check. The Invisible Scout exited the special classroom building and moved on to the First Boys’ Dormitory a little way away. Shiba and his gang had occupied this place up until the day before yesterday, which meant it was our best bet.

I won’t keep you in suspense—we found it.

In one of the dorm rooms, there was a laptop with a USB port. In fact, to be precise, this was my room. Being bullied as I was, I’d hidden my computer in a place where no one would think to look. The Invisible Scout gently retrieved the laptop from where I’d stashed it behind a shelf, and I found it cute how puzzled it looked, wondering if this was the item we were looking for.

I didn’t tell the Scout to bring the laptop back right away. The battery was probably dead, and we’d need a power source to use it. Even if we used the generator in the basement of the abandoned house, the charging cable was hidden elsewhere, so we’d need that first.

The Invisible Scout left the building and looked all around. Casually, it glanced up.

“What is...?” I breathed, involuntarily clenching my fist.

Something was coming down from the floating fortress.

It descended slowly, twirling gently like a falling leaf. Even as far away as it was, I could tell the thing was immense. An unbelievable thought crossed my mind—but no, there was no mistake. It was the dinosaur-like monster, Terrasaur Agnamu, that I’d seen in the forest. I swallowed hard.

A god-tier monster is coming down toward us...

Had the fortress already seen us and deployed this thing to hunt us down? Or maybe it was just out for some post-meal exercise, like a dog being taken for a walk. I sincerely hoped it was the latter and did my best to push the thought of that creature from my mind.

Soon, the Invisible Scout's attention shifted to where a formation of ten or more ogres marched in an orderly line along the forest's edge. They seemed oblivious to us. Of course, the Invisible Scout was transparent, but who knew the full extent of a mage ogre's magic? I wouldn't have been surprised if they had some type of See Invisibility spell.

Following my advance instructions, the Invisible Scout hid in the shadows of the buildings, allowing the ogre troop to pass by. Watching them was nerve-wracking, but luckily, they didn't seem to see us. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Looks pretty intense out there, doesn't it, Kazu?" Tamaki asked, resting a hand on my shoulder.

The palpitations of my racing heart began to subside. Her carefree voice was always soothing.

"We've found the laptop. Once Mia gets back, we'll all go inside to get it."

"That's great!" Tamaki chuckled, and that alone did a lot to calm my nerves.

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Not long after the Invisible Scout returned, Mia and Arisu made it back, too. They hadn't encountered any enemies, which was good; it meant there were probably no remaining soldiers near the high school, which would have complicated our future plans. Of course, if push came to shove, we'd have no choice but to deal with them.

One of our challenges was trying to gain as much experience as possible to level up, which wasn't easy that day.

If only we didn't have to worry about the enemy boss and the fortress cannon, we could let loose.

"So there really is a basement under the high school grounds," Arisu reported. "Like an underground room... more like a massive hall."

"It had the vibe of a shelter," Mia added, taking out her camera. "But the entire wall was covered with characters we couldn't decipher."

She's always so prepared, I thought. But my relaxed mood lasted only until I glanced at the camera's display.

"Fixed coordinates, spatial search, limited range..."

The characters were the same as the ones I'd seen on the stone pillar earlier. But there was an additional phrase this time.

"Circuit opposition setting?"

I couldn't quite grasp the meaning, but I did understand that those four terms looped endlessly across the wall. To truly comprehend their significance, we'd probably need to visit the place ourselves.

"What does all of this mean?" I wondered aloud.

"Beats me," Mia shrugged, then added playfully, "You mind if I make a wild guess?"

"Sure, if you've got a game-inspired theory, I'm all ears," I responded, albeit a bit hesitantly.

For some reason, Mia puffed out her chest proudly.

Is being praised for your gamer brain really that much of a compliment? I wondered.

"Well, for example, let's say the Japanese government's responsible for the otherworldly transfer. They installed a device in our school's basement and transported the entire mountain to another world."

"But why would they do that?"

"Who knows? Like I said, it's just a random guess."

It didn't make much sense. Even if they had information about another world, why would they send a *mountain*? A military force would have been more logical.

"Oh! Maybe there were unintended effects from the otherworldly transfer experiment."

"You totally just thought of that now, didn't you?"

“Originally, they were going to send the Self-Defense Forces to the Warring States period, but they accidentally sent our mountain instead.”

“That theory has quite a few holes.”

“Absolutely. Sending the Yomiuri Giants would probably have been a stronger move.” And just like that, I was lost. Mia was probably referencing some anime or game.

“So far, we’ve assumed that we were summoned here by some godlike entity. But now, there’s a small possibility of another scenario. That’s all I wanted to point out,” she concluded.

Mia’s speculation boiled down to two main points:

1. Some organization or individual on Earth had caused our mountain to shift.
2. Or someone from this world had summoned our mountain.

Either way, the audacity of such an act made my blood boil. We’d been thrust into this chaotic battle without even understanding why. We were still fighting without knowing what the right course of action was. We weren’t even sure if defeating the demon army would resolve everything.

In our state of uncertainty, however, brainstorming sessions like this were invaluable. We never knew which idea might lead us closer to the truth.

“By the way,” I began, “was the wall in the basement normal concrete?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’m not really a materials expert, but it seemed like regular concrete to me,” Arisu replied, sounding a bit unsure.

None of us were experts in that regard, so we knew as much as she did. If only Yuuki was here, he might’ve had a better understanding of this stuff.

“From a quick look around, it looked like everything mentioned in her brother’s note was brought into that underground room,” Arisu continued.

“I see... Hmmm, what should we prioritize? The laptop or the basement?” I pondered aloud.

“I say we should focus on the laptop first,” Arisu suggested. “I’m curious about what’s on Yuuki-senpai’s USB drive.”

“Sounds good to me,” I agreed. It was crucial that we find out how much of this mystery Yuuki had unraveled. What we discovered from his data could either be a blessing or another challenge to face.

Regardless, turning away from the truth wasn’t an option for us. No matter what the reality held, we had to confront it head-on. We did not have the luxury of ignoring the facts laid before us.

Chapter 132: Secure the Laptop

Led by the Invisible Scout, our group of five cautiously made our way toward the high school. While we were on high alert, our strategy was straightforward: if we encountered a group of ogres, we would swiftly and decisively eliminate them. We wanted to reduce the enemy forces as much as possible; avoiding them might lead to getting ambushed later on.

Outnumbered as we were, we needed to maintain the initiative and dictate the pace of each skirmish.

The Invisible Scout identified two patrolling groups in the vicinity of the high school. They were spaced far apart enough that, if we acted quickly, the second wouldn't notice the first being taken out. For that reason, we decided to eliminate both.

Our efforts resulted in the defeat of one mage ogre, eleven normal ogres, thirteen orcs, and two giant wasps. All of us leveled up, except Arisu, who had already done so recently. We all decided to save our Skill Points. But I got a special ability from the Mia Vendor: Familiar Awakening. It cost 2,000 tokens, leaving me with 441.

Though my reserves were dwindling, I held high hopes for this new ability.

"I'd like to test this trump card if I can..." I mused.

"Right. The fact that we can't summon Sha-Lau in the White Room is quite a limitation," Mia observed.

She had a good point. Why couldn't we summon familiars we had dedicated contracts with in this place? Was there some restriction we didn't know about?

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 32	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5

SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 4
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TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 27	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 3	SKILL POINTS: 3

MIA	
LEVEL: 27	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC: 8	SKILL POINTS: 8

RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 21	FIRE MAGIC: 8
SKILL POINTS: 6	

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Before we left the forest, we made everyone invisible using a combination of Deflection and Greater Invisibility.

Around the main school building roamed a mixed battalion of orcs and ogres, but they were still quite a distance away.

“Go!”

At my signal, our now-invisible group sprinted forward.

We maybe should have used Silent Field to muffle our sounds, but then we wouldn't have had a way to know where everyone was, and if we got into any combat, we risked hitting one another—and the emotional toll of such an accident would have been far greater than any physical injury.

We soon reached the first boys' dorm, and despite the noise, it seemed the ogres hadn't noticed us. Our invisibility wore off just as we dashed through the entrance.

"Let the Invisible Scout keep watch here," I instructed. "Everyone else, follow me."

It had been several days since we'd last been here, and as we walked down the hall, I could see that everything had changed since then.

We arrived at my room. My roommate was probably dead by now.

He hadn't bullied me, but he'd turned a blind eye to it. I didn't feel any particular resentment, but neither did I feel any particular sentiment.

I grabbed the laptop from where I'd hidden it. As expected, the battery was dead. I packed it and its power cord into my bag.

"This is Kazu's room! Quick, look for his porn!"

"All righty, then! Mia-chan, where should we start? The drawer?"

"H-Hold on! Don't do that... Oh no, not you, too, Tamaki-chan!"

There was some commotion going on, but I chose to ignore it.

Rushia stood with wide-eyed wonder as Arisu and the others made a fuss. She seemed utterly intrigued by the dorm room.

"Hmm, no naughty magazines. Oh! Maybe they're *inside* the laptop..."

"I plead the fifth."

"Why be shy now? Or do you have... unique tastes?"

With a deadpan expression, Mia let out a creepy chuckle. "Heh-heh-heh-heh."

"What kind of laugh is that?"

“It’s a trend in the *Dreamland* community.”

“Seriously, stop. It feels like you’re draining my sanity,” I said. “Stop messing around; we need to get out of here. It’ll be a mess if the ogres find us here.”

I shrugged.

“Hmm. Shouldn’t we look through the other rooms too? There might be something useful.”

“I’d love to, but I think Yuuki-senpai and the others have already scoured the place.”

“Oh, right.”

Indeed, the doors of many rooms in the building had been left open, with signs of a hurried search. Everyone had probably had the same idea: grab anything that might be of use. At this point, it was unlikely we’d find anything they missed.

“We should head back to the basement of the abandoned house now. Start up the generator, check what’s on the USB stick...” I said as I began counting the tasks on my fingers.

Just as I was about to mention the third task, the whole building shook violently, the walls giving off loud creaks.

“An earthquake?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone fall to the ground. I quickly turned to see Rushia flailing about and hyperventilating, her face pale as a ghost.

Ah, right. I’ve heard that some people from the continents aren’t used to earthquakes...

It was almost funny to watch her, so far removed from her usual calm demeanor. But this wasn’t the time for laughter.

“I-I’m so sorry,” she breathed as she recovered. “It felt like the world was turned upside down. It’s like... the wrath of the gods...”

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s just an earthquake. In my country, we’re used to them because they’re...”

Wait a second. An earthquake? We’re not at home; our mountain’s been transported to some part of the continent.

Then, what is this?

A chill ran down my spine. I swallowed hard.

“Kazu, outside!”

Mia leaned out the window, her face full of urgency. “It’s coming!” she called.

“What is?”

“The dinosaur.”

I dashed over to the window to see the colossal four-legged reptile charging directly toward us.

“The Terrasaur Agnamu, right?”

All I could do was nod.

Does it... know we’re here? But how?

There was no time for speculation. Holding our ground here was too risky.

I looked back to see Arisu and Tamaki on either side of Rushia, holding her up.

“Mia, let’s retreat into the forest with Deflection!”

“Got it. Greater Invisibility!”

In an instant, all of us vanished. We scattered, jumping out the windows and sprinting into the woods. The Invisible Scout at the dorm entrance followed close on our heels.

“This isn’t good. It’s tracking us,” Mia muttered as she took a glance over her shoulder. And she was right. The Terrasaur Agnamu had locked onto our position and was rapidly closing the distance.

Could it be...?

“Didn’t they say the Terrasaur Agnamu can use Earth Magic? It might have some kind of seismic detection.”

“Probably. It’s got Rank 5 Vibration Sense.”

I signaled for everyone to halt. “Mia, get ready. Deflection!”

“Right. Fly.”

In an instant, we were all hovering in midair.

This should do it, I thought, but Mia whispered. “Oh, it’s still looking right at us.”

Damn, that won’t work...

Was it using a spell like See Invisibility? Or maybe it’s a natural ability to detect invisible things. After all, it was a monster; it wouldn’t be strange for it to possess abilities we’d never even heard of. The Phantom Wolf King, Sha-Lau, had mentioned having such a heightened sense, though I don’t think even he could detect targets from such a distance.

Was the Terrasaur Agnamu simply of a higher rank? Or maybe it specialized in those kinds of detection abilities...

In any case, engaging it here would be a grave mistake. Ideally, we would escape into the woods.

The dinosaur-like monster opened its massive jaws, and I knew instantly that something was coming. If it was proficient in Earth Magic...

“Mia, boost our defenses! Deflection!”

“Resist Earth!”

Mia’s green aura enveloped us, even as we remained invisible.

The next moment, a jet-black breath was unleashed from the Terrasaur Agnamu’s maw.

“Reflection!”

I barely managed to deflect the attack directed at me. Tamaki, with a swift strike of her white blade, parried the breath. Luckily, Arisu was flying too high to be in its range.

Mia and Rushia, however, found themselves swallowed by the dark vortex. A sharp scream, like the tearing of silk, echoed through the air, accompanied by a

spray of blood.

“Watch out, Kazu! It’s shards of metal!” Tamaki shouted.

“Infusing mana into tons of metal fragments and shooting them as breath... damn it,” I muttered.

Mia and Rushia were injured in several places—blood streamed from their foreheads and limbs, and Rushia’s left hand was bent at an unnatural angle—but they remained conscious. Under normal circumstances, they’d be in critical condition, but...

Wait, why isn’t Arisu using her Healing Magic? Has she not seen their injuries?

Ah, right. We’re still invisible. With See Invisibility, I’m the only one who can see what’s going on.

“Arisu, Mia and Rushia are hurt. Quick!”

“R-Right! Area Heal!”

A healing aura emanated from Arisu, enveloping us in its warmth. Mia and Rushia both let out soft groans as their wounds began to mend under the magic’s influence. It was a small relief in the midst of the chaos.

Well, not exactly a “relief” considering the situation...

“Kazu! It’s coming!” Tamaki warned, swiftly moving to stand between me and the impending threat.

The Terrasaur Agnamu lunged, propelling itself off the ground.

“It can fly?!” I exclaimed.

Just as our invisibility wore off, Tamaki beckoned to it with a fearless grin. “Come on, give it your best shot!”

Darn it, we have no choice but to fight now.

“Leave it to us!” Tamaki declared.

With that, we braced ourselves for battle.

Chapter 133: The Attack of the Behemoth

Engaging in surprise battles wasn't my cup of tea. However, without knowing how the Terrasaur Agnamu had detected us, we had to take it down fast or risk being pursued relentlessly.

"We need to finish this quickly," I called to the group!

Another reason we couldn't take too long was that it could lead to being surrounded by enemies—especially since the ogres still had their trump card, the fortress cannon. And the Terrasaur Agnamu probably wasn't the only one of its kind to have come down from there. Plus, the threat of Azagralith, who might take an interest in us, loomed large.

Battling a lieutenant of the Demon King, commanding divine soldiers... It wasn't a scenario I wanted to think about, especially in our depleted state.

For now, in this battle, I had to operate under the assumption that we were being watched. After casting a group-wide haste spell with Deflection...

"Tamaki, Arisu, go in full force. Mia, give it everything. Rushia, save your strength."

Only Rushia had the special ability of magical release. That was our ace in the hole and needed to be kept under wraps, especially because its explosive nature was very conspicuous. Still, to mount a swift offense, we would need to rely on Mia for immobilization.

"Storm Bind!"

This Rank 8 Wind spell enveloped the ten-meter-long dinosaur monster in heavy, sticky whirlwinds. It was the most potent binding spell when used conventionally.

No matter how formidable a divine soldier, it should...

A deafening roar erupted from the Terrasaur Agnamu, making the air quiver.

Damn it, a dispelling roar...?

At first, I thought the roar was a sign of the monster's resistance, but the air around the Terrasaur Agnamu remained unchanged. Instead, a moment later, the ground exploded, launching a massive cloud of dust into the air. Arisu and Tamaki, who were diving from above, were engulfed by the dust cloud. Their screams were muffled by the roar and the noise of the explosion.

"Was that a counter with Earth Magic?"

But wait, none of the Earth Magic we know can do that. Could it be a specialized magic only monsters have? In any case, it's unpredictable. And to think such a massive creature could be magic-oriented!

"We can't see through the smoke. Our attacks are..." Rushia groaned.

Indeed, the thick dust cloud obstructed our view. If we carelessly unleashed an attack now, Arisu or Tamaki might be caught in it. We'd been utterly outplayed from the very beginning. But we couldn't falter now.

"Mia, clear the smoke. Even if it hits Arisu and Tamaki."

"Tempest."

A magical gale raged, sweeping away the dust. On the other side, Arisu and Tamaki looked slightly disoriented, but they made it through okay.

"Now's our chance! Dive in, both of you!"

"Okay, Kazu-san!"

"Got it!"

With the wind from the tempest at their backs, the two girls accelerated, attacking the Terrasaur Agnamu with single-minded fierceness. Arisu's thrust cracked its thick exoskeleton, while Tamaki's slash made a small cut in its neck. Blue blood sprayed into the air, and the massive creature shuddered. For a moment, it seemed to shrink. But the next instant, the Terrasaur Agnamu seemed to explode. Or rather, myriad tentacle-like appendages shot out from gaps in its exoskeleton.

Eugh, that's so disgusting!

“Whoa, eek!”

“Damn it, back off!”

Arisu and Tamaki were caught off guard by the tentacles, which coiled around their arms and legs. The unsettling sound of bones snapping echoed in the distance, and both girls cried out in pain and distress.

This is bad. Those tentacles are thin, but they're freakishly strong. At this rate, broken bones will be the least of our worries. They could be torn limb from limb.

“Mia, Rushia, hit those tentacles!”

“Right. Flame Arrow!”

“Mm. Lightning Arrow!”

The arrows of fire and lightning they unleashed pierced the tentacles that bound Arisu and Tamaki. The two front-liners managed to break free, stumbling backward in retreat.

“Area Heal!” cried Arisu. But we all knew mending broken bones would take some time.

Meanwhile, the bound Terrasaur Agnamu extended even more tentacles.

“Summon Familiar: Phantom Wolf King Sha-Lau!”

As soon as the majestic silver wolf appeared, I cast the standard buffing spells on him, preparing him to fend off the Terrasaur Agnamu's tentacles.

“I'm counting on you, Sha-Lau. Protect Arisu and Tamaki.”

“Leave it to me, my master.”

Sha-Lau landed grandly on the ground, unleashing countless lightning bolts that met the approaching tentacles midair. The air crackled, and bright sparks flew in the clash of powers.

However, we were dealing with a divine-class enemy, and even Sha-Lau's magical offense seemed a little underpowered. A few tentacles managed to break through the wolf king's electrical barrier.

“Just a minor setback!”

Still limping, Tamaki leaped forward. She stepped just ahead of Sha-Lau, using her Rank 3 Strength and swinging her white blade with one hand. A radiant beam extended from the sword, incinerating the approaching tentacles. Following the attack, however, Tamaki seemed to falter, almost kneeling in midair.

“Ouch... that hurts...”

“Tamaki-chan, don’t push yourself too hard!”

“Hey, this *is* the time to push ourselves! Arisu, stay back.”

Tamaki’s brave words were admirable, but right then, I wished she would be more cautious.

“We’re up against a divine-class enemy. Being reckless will put us all in danger!”

“But... ugh, all right, Kazu-san,” Tamaki groaned, retreating behind Sha-Lau.

She really knows how to be charming without even trying, doesn’t she? Well, not that I’m complaining.

Arisu continuously cast Area Heal, understanding that now wasn’t the time to conserve MP. Her priority was on point. Maintaining our frontline was crucial.

“Sha-Lau, can you buy us a bit more time?”

“I will attempt to, Master.”

“Thanks... Haste.”

Under the effects of the acceleration spell, the phantom wolf moved with an agility that belied his massive form. He darted around, leaving afterimages in the air, playing tricks on the tentacles with his rapid footwork. Closing in, he unleashed a barrage of close-range lightning strikes.

Dozens of tentacles charred and fell, but more sprouted from the dinosaur-like monster’s body. It seemed endless.

“Electric Stun!”

“Flame Javelin!”

Mia paralyzed the enemy momentarily with a paralyzing bolt, and Rushia launched a spear of flames, landing a direct hit on its head and causing it to reel momentarily.

Though we seemed to be chipping away at it bit by bit, the Terrasaur Agnamu was every bit as resilient as something that massive should be, multiplying its tentacles even as we watched.

Ugh, is this thing specifically tailored to fight multiple enemies at once?

If that's the case...

"Arisu, fall back! Focus on defending us!"

"But..."

"The ogres have noticed us. They'll be here soon."

Indeed, an ogre brigade was quickly closing in on our position. I had been planning to summon another familiar to intercept them, but if the Terrasaur Agnamu excelled against multiple opponents, I thought we shouldn't play to its strengths.

The massive monster shuddered mightily—finally breaking free from Storm Bind, which had been weakening over time.

No issues there; we had known this would happen.

"Mm. Another round of Storm Bind?"

Mia restrained the now-mobile monster once more with her binding magic.

As relentless as ever.

"Trap and kill. A basic hunting strategy."

"Absolutely."

But in this case, letting our guard down might mean those tentacles would reach us. We absolutely had to remain vigilant.

For now, with Sha-Lau and Tamaki forming a two-tiered defensive formation against the swarm of tentacles, we should be all right. As long as that formation held, we would be in a good position.

After Arisu quickly returned to our side and received my Haste spell, she charged solo into the mass of ogres, wreaking havoc left and right.

As Arisu cut down two ogres, Rushia leveled up.

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In the White Room, we took a moment to reconfirm our strategy moving forward.

First off, we needed to take out the Terrasaur Agnamu as fast as possible. In the meantime, Arisu would hold back the swarm of ogres. The real issue was figuring out how to defeat this incredibly hardy dinosaur-like monster.

“I’ve got a great idea! I’ll charge right in and go ‘whoosh!’ to take it down in one swoop!”

“Tamaki, come here.”

“Huh? What is it, Kazu?”

Hoping to receive some affection, Tamaki happily approached. I took the opportunity to grind my knuckles into her temples. She let out a cute yelp.



“That’s some tough love...”

Even Arisu looked exasperated.

It’s necessary. She wouldn’t learn without a bit of pain.

“Recklessly charging in is a no-go. I’m saying this out of concern for you, you know.”

“Yes, sir...”

“And weren’t you just caught by those tentacles and had your bones broken a moment ago?”

“Oh, I just let my guard down then! I’ll be fine next time, for sure!”

Where is this confidence coming from?

Everyone, save for our naive Tamaki, shot her disapproving glances.

“Mm. She seems to show absolutely no sign of reflection.”

Indeed, the synchronicity of our team’s sentiments was oddly comforting.

Chapter 134: Overcoming the Wall of Tentacles

Dealing with the Terrasaur Agnamu’s tentacles was basically like battling dozens of enemies at the same time. Engaging them head-on would likely lead to us being overwhelmed by their sheer numbers. So, the straightforward approach was out of the question.

The first step was to reduce our frontline, which is why I asked Arisu to step back.

“Now, Mia, we’re counting on you,” I told her.

“Mm. I’ll give it a shot.”

We spent another minute in discussion, but there was no point in having Rushia learn magic other than Fire Magic at this stage, so we decided to save her Skill Points.

RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 22	FIRE MAGIC: 8
SKILL POINTS: 8	

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Back on the battlefield, we sprang into action immediately.

“Fire Storm!” Rushia called, attacking the still-bound Terrasaur Agnamu. The torrential blaze, which I thought must have looked exactly like the flames of hell, held back the sprawling tentacles it extended toward us.

“Tamaki, now’s the time! Fall back!”

“Got it!”

Freed from close combat, Tamaki retreated, soaring back to us through the air.

Meanwhile, Sha-Lau continued to release electric shocks, effectively restraining the enemy. Luckily, the nimble phantom wolf, despite his size, managed to avoid being caught by the tentacles. It occurred to me that his agility might be his most potent weapon. Those four legs could certainly come in handy.

While musing on this, I reapplied Haste to Tamaki as a precaution. Next, Rushia cast High Resist Fire, a Rank 8 fire spell. Mia followed with High Resist Wind, a Rank 8 wind spell. The highest tier of resistance spells significantly boosts resistance against the corresponding magical attacks. This meant we could unleash Fire and Wind Magic without reservations, even while Tamaki was engaged in close combat.

“Okay, I’m going in!”

“Wait, wait, not yet!”

I grabbed the eager Tamaki’s hand so Rushia could cast Shimmer, a Rank 6 fire spell, on her. Shimmer created mirage-like illusions around the target. The faster the target moved, the more illusions it generated. In other words, it was a cloning technique. Although the clones don’t possess any offensive power, they might serve as a distraction, especially since our foe, despite being of divine class caliber, was likely unused to fighting in midair.

Mia then cast Blur, a Rank 6 Wind spell that caused the target’s entire body to appear blurry. This would make it even more challenging for the Terrasaur Agnamu to target Tamaki.

We deliberately refrained from casting Greater Invisibility; if she got too close, the monster’s all-encompassing perception would likely detect her, invisible or not, but the subtle distortions caused by Shimmer and Blur would make it hard to pinpoint her right away. Hopefully, these spells would give us the slight edge we needed.

Having this kind of information was another testament to the value of our exclusive contract with Sha-Lau.

Finally, Mia cast Wind Walk. We figured that solid footing, even in the air, would be beneficial for someone like Tamaki, who wielded a heavy sword.

“Go!”

“Got it, I’m on it!”

I pushed her back, and with a trail of red luminescence and Shimmer afterimages, Tamaki soared through the sky. She descended diagonally from above and headed straight for the Terrasaur Agnamu, who, engulfed in flames and still distracted by Sha-Lau, hadn’t noticed her approach.

Wait, what? It hasn’t seen her coming?

“That’s right, it’s using thermal detection!” I realized too late. Given that the creature resembled some kind of reptilian, it made sense that it would have some kind of infrared vision. However, it was currently surrounded by the fiery wall Rushia had unleashed.

Damn it, I was so slow on the uptake!

My oversight turned into an unexpected opportunity. Without hesitation, Tamaki plunged through the wall of flames, bypassing the tentacles and delivering a slashing blow to the beast’s thick hide.

Her blade shimmered as it tore a sizable gash. Blue ichor sprayed into the air, and the Terrasaur Agnamu let out something between a scream and a roar, thrashing violently in pain.

Yes! It’s working!

Tamaki’s prowess as a Rank 9 attacker wasn’t just for show. Unlike in our battles with Mekish Grau and the Legend Arachne, we now had a piece on the board that could match a divine-class adversary in terms of skill.

Our job, as support, was to get that piece right next to the enemy.

And that’s exactly what we did.

Now, all that’s left...

“Finish it off in one go. Rushia, use your offensive magic. Mia, you should...”

“Electric Stun!”

Before I could even issue the command, Mia swiftly cast the Rank 7 spell, momentarily paralyzing the Terrasaur Agnamu. This brief lapse gave Tamaki the opening she needed.

“Here I go!”

With a battle cry that could tear through silk, she delivered a fierce blow. Not missing a beat, Rushia unleashed her Rank 8 Fire spell Incinerate. Flames erupted from her palms, engulfing both Tamaki and the massive beast and searing every inch of them.

“Hey, that’s hot!” Tamaki cried out. Apparently, even with the High Resist, a Rank 8 offensive spell could be quite intense. But still...

“I’ll direct all my rage at this beast!”

Thanks to Incinerate, the tentacles finally began to melt, hanging lifelessly. Seizing her opportunity, Tamaki swung her blade, which left a deep gash on the long neck of the monster. It wasn’t quite a decapitation, but she’d probably hit a major artery. Azure blood spewed out like a fountain. The Terrasaur Agnamu thrashed in violent agony, breaking free from its restraints. Desperate to escape the flames, it descended, landing on the asphalt.

“Now’s the time, Mia!”

“Got it. Stone Bind!”

The asphalt, turned sticky by Mia’s magic, clung to the soles of the beast’s feet. Of its four legs, two were firmly stuck to the ground. The Terrasaur Agnamu quickly realized its predicament, attempting to shake off the asphalt and free itself. However, this only created another huge opening.

“I’m diving in! Watch me, Kazu!”

Tamaki lunged at the creature, aiming a slashing blow at the head that sat atop its giraffe-like neck. From where I stood, it looked like she’d managed to slice off the tip of its nose. In any case, the beast reacted violently, swinging its head from side to side to fling Tamaki away.

“Darn it!”

Tamaki was swift in her recovery. Using the air as her foothold, she stabilized herself, then launched herself forward, delivering another blow to the Terrasaur Agnamu’s elongated neck.

In a one-on-one, the odds might have been even, or the beast could have leveraged its massive size to dominate. But with our support, the terrain’s advantage, and our combat experience against god-tier opponents, the tables had turned. Indeed, we were stronger today than even yesterday.

On the other hand, Arisu, who had charged into a group of ten ogres—including one mage—seemed to be struggling a bit after her initial bold assault. Her main challenge had been the mage, who had coordinated the remaining forces to surround her and launch combined attacks. Even with Arisu’s long spear, the reach of a sword-wielding ogre was longer. Leveraging their massive stature and covering for each other, they posed a formidable challenge, even to a warrior like Arisu. But considering she was singlehandedly holding her ground against eight ogres, she was undeniably impressive.

“Rushia, back up Arisu!”

“Understood... Dread Fire!”

With Rushia’s fear-inducing flame spell, the tide of the battle shifted once again. No matter how well the mage tried to command his troops, at the end of the day, fodder remained fodder. Their magic resistance was pitifully weak.

Intimidated and skittish, the ogres were easy prey for Arisu, who darted in and out, delivering thrust after thrust. Her strikes weren’t meant to kill, but to immobilize and hinder their movements. Yes, Arisu knew her priorities well.

Technically, if Rushia had unleashed Incinerate on all of them, including Arisu, it would have ended things in an instant. But Arisu wasn’t shielded by High Resist.

Seeing Tamaki in action, it was clear we had to be careful since we didn’t know the extent of the potential damage. The High Resist spells had a notably shorter duration than their lower-tier counterparts—just ten seconds per rank. The High Resist Fire cast on Tamaki would only last eighty seconds. While its

effect was phenomenal, it was challenging to use without knowing in advance what the enemy might unleash. If this were a game, the spell would be praised for its balance. But this was reality. Lives were on the line.

Why can't this be easier?

No use complaining, though. With Arisu holding off the enemies, we had our part to do. We needed to bring down the Terrasaur Agnamu as soon as possible.

“Rushia, make a wall of flames for support. Sha-Lau, go in while Tamaki’s distracting it!”

“Got it, master.”

Rushia’s wall of fire surrounded the dinosaur-like monster, severely limiting its infrared detection capabilities. The Terrasaur Agnamu appeared confused, looking around frantically. This was our chance.

Sha-Lau charged from the opposite direction as Tamaki. Although the monster tried to fend him off with its tentacles, Mia joined in with an Electric Stun, momentarily immobilizing the Terrasaur Agnamu. In that brief moment, Sha-Lau closed the gap.

His claws and fangs dug deep into the flesh beneath the skin that Tamaki had sliced open, and the Terrasaur Agnamu screamed in pain. It tried to shake off the majestic wolf, but he clung on fiercely with the sharp claws of his front paws.

Next, the monster tried going after the Sha-Lau’s thick fur with its tentacles. The attack would’ve broken a human’s bones in one hit, but for Sha-Lau’s massive frame, it seemed to be a mere annoyance. The mighty wolf was relentless, gritting his teeth and refusing to let go of his prey. This distracted the beast’s attention from Tamaki significantly.

She wouldn’t let this opportunity slip away.

“Let’s end this in one shot!”

Tamaki swung her gleaming white sword with all her might. Its blade elongated, piercing the defenseless eye of the monster and reaching deep into

its brain. It was a fatal blow. The monstrous Terrasaur Agnamu slowly collapsed, creating a thunderous crash that sent clouds of dust rising from beyond the wall of flames. The monster's massive form turned translucent and then vanished, transforming into a yellow gem. It was finally over.

Just as I let out a sigh of relief, Sha-Lau shouted, "Wait! There's something else, Master!"

The next moment, Tamaki's body was slammed into the ground, her form crumpling grotesquely.

What the hell just happened?

The answer appeared swiftly. Emerging from the crimson flames that had enveloped Terrasaur Agnamu was a massive, jet-black figure.

"Azagralith!"

A dark-skinned ogre floated in the air, unarmed. Using only its fist, it had crushed Tamaki in one blow. The pitch-black demon sneered, its malevolent crimson eyes locking onto me. A shiver ran down my spine.

Just then, Arisu managed to defeat an ogre in a far-off pack, leading to her leveling up.

Chapter 135: The Arrival of the Demon General

In the White Room, we stared blankly down at Tamaki, who lay sprawled on the floor. Her limbs were twisted in unnatural directions, foam bubbled from her mouth, and her entire body was convulsing. The sight was so horrific that my mind struggled to process it.

The first to react was Arisu, who hadn't directly witnessed what had happened.

"Tamaki-chan!"

Arisu rushed to her gravely injured friend, fervently casting healing spells. After a moment, her work paid off, and Tamaki slowly rose. She gazed at me with hollow eyes, her face a mix of confusion and pain.

"I didn't see it," she muttered. Her voice trembled, and her blue eyes were filled with distress. "I felt something coming, so I tried to brace myself, but that was all I could do."

"I'm just as lost," I replied. *Did the enemy use some sort of invisibility spell to sneak up on us?*

Even so, I had See Invisibility activated. It was true; with the chaotic battle and swirling flames, I might've missed the demon's approach at first. Still, not even noticing someone like Azagralith until the moment Tamaki was struck felt odd.

"It was probably smoke," Mia remarked.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's like a shapeshifting ability. They turned into smoke, got close, and hid behind the Terrasaur Agnamu... then hit when our guard was down."

"You saw it?"

"I noticed something like a mist fluttering around, like a wind I hadn't created. It felt... off."

As Mia looked up at me, her face was expressionless, but her clenched fist revealed her deep frustration and regret.



“But... I failed to notice the important signs. Even though I thought something was off, I couldn’t tell you guys. Kazu, I messed up,” Mia admitted, her eyes downcast.

“Just learn from it and move forward,” I told her. “Always tell me about anything that seems suspicious, no matter how small it is. Even a simple warning can make a huge difference.”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

I ruffled Mia’s hair a bit too roughly, and the petite girl squirmed, displaying a hint of annoyance.

“It seems the Terrasaur Agnamu was just a decoy,” Rushia mused.

From the beginning, Azagralith had planned to approach us while we were occupied fighting the Terrasaur Agnamu, then strike when we least expected it. From his perspective, we were probably just like pesky flies buzzing around the forest with our guerrilla tactics.

Even if he’d mobilized the ogres to do a sweep operation, there was a good chance we would have eluded them. So, he decided to first take down Tamaki and use her as a hostage, ensuring we couldn’t flee. If we abandoned Tamaki and ran, he’d still have managed to reduce our numbers. And that’s why he’d been willing to use a god-tier monster as bait.

Whether or not this strategy was beneficial for him was beside the point. For us, it was a critical threat.

“Hold on,” I said as I pondered aloud, resting a hand on my chin. “Isn’t this strategy based on a pretty deep understanding of our behavior? I mean, isn’t the idea that we’d abandon Tamaki completely out of the question? Does that mean the enemy’s been studying us?”

“Maybe they learned about us through the doppelgänger,” I speculated.

“Mm, that could be it. Otherwise, using a god-tier monster as bait is quite a bold strategy,” Tamaki agreed, nodding and then shaking her head.

“We don’t know when the doppelgänger infiltrated the high school, but based on what happened yesterday, they must’ve made contact with some students

by the second night.”

“How’d you figure that out, Mia?”

“If the rumors are true, the doppelgänger was impersonating someone called Shiba. That means it must’ve come into contact with the real Shiba at some point... and Shiba died on the second night.”

We’d taken down some of the doppelgängers the day before, but there was no guarantee we got them all. Some might still have been mingling with the students who’d gone to the Light People.

In fact, the Greater Ninja had gone over to their side, and I bet she’d have teamed up with Yuuki and Shiki to root out all the doppelgängers.

Thinking back, if we hadn’t managed to send Keiko to the other side back then... It gave me the chills.

Thanks to that, we’d ended up trapped here.

And now, we found ourselves in an increasingly dire situation.

“If any doppelgängers survived... they’d definitely get in touch with the ogres and spill everything about us.”

“We should assume they know all about us. Like how we can be soft on our allies, or how Tamaki can be a bit... clumsy, and how Kazu can be kind of a pushover at times.”

“I am *not* clumsy!” Tamaki protested, tears forming in her eyes.

I just turned away, staying silent. If I joined in the protest now, it’d just make things more chaotic. But Arisu interjected for me. “Kazu isn’t a pushover at all! He’s always... um...” she began, her face flushing red as she trailed off. “I mean... he does what’s needed... right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Mia responded in an unusually snarky tone, shooting me a glare.

“Let’s stay focused, Mia. We can hash this out later.”

“Fine. But don’t forget about it.”

Trust me, I’m going to try my hardest to forget. Anyway...

“How should we approach this...? At the very least, we need to pin down Azagralith, retrieve Tamaki, and run. That should be our basic strategy, right?”

“But can we really get away?” Rushia asked, tilting her head in doubt.

Yeah, that’s the concern. But can we really win if we confront them head-on now?

“Um, Kazu? What if I...”

“If you’re about to say ‘leave me behind and escape,’ I’ll use all of Mia’s weird tools to punish you.”

“But—!”

Tamaki stared at me with a tragic determination. I gently stroked her hair, which reminded me of golden autumn wheat.

“We’re not leaving you behind. That’s the bottom line. Got it?”

“But against that guy...”

“We’ll plan our strategy from here... Mia, any ideas?”

“Well,” she pondered, “if we tie him up and use an enema...”

“Let’s skip that.”

“First, if Tamaki isn’t at her best, we don’t stand a chance. Fighting Azalith along with his minions is out of the question. We need to lure him out alone, and then, maybe, just maybe, with all of us pounding on him, we might stand a chance. How’s that sound?”

Don’t give him a nickname, I willed her silently.

“Yeah, that would be the least we need to do.”

But honestly, even with that, I’m not sure we could win. Right now, even against a divine-class enemy, we’re barely holding on. Against an entity that commands a divine-class being, how effective can we be?

And so we refined our plan, discussing and strategizing. Whenever we got tired, we’d summon a feast. Rushia, as always, focused on the desserts.

The initial move was everything. We anticipated various scenarios and devised countermeasures for each.

We decided to hold onto Arisu’s Skill Points, despite her having leveled up. Resolved, we left the White Room.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 28	SPEARMANSHIP: 8
HEALING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 5

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The battle resumed.

Enveloped in crimson flames, Azagralith laughed uproariously. He slowly descended to the ground. At his feet lay Tamaki, her limbs brutally twisted.

So, he wasn’t making the first move?

He clearly knew Tamaki was our best fighter. He also understood we wouldn’t abandon a comrade. In other words, he was underestimating us.

With the ogre troops at her back, Arisu rushed to Tamaki’s side. As she did, I used Deportation on the Invisible Scout beside me.

The familiar was banished, turning into MP.

Now, everything was in place. It was time to play our trump card.

“Sha-Lau!”

I activated a special ability called Familiar Awakening, which consumed almost all of my remaining MP—a total of 162. The Phantom Wolf King’s body glowed a deep, dark red, and he let out an epic roar.

“Keep Azagralith at bay!”

“You can count on me, Master.”

“Hmm. If you happen to defeat him, that’s fine too.”

Mia, that sounded like a death flag.

Sha-Lau lunged at Azagralith. In response, the jet-black ogre took a step forward, facing the massive silver wolf head-on.

“Entertain me,” he sneered with a vicious grin.

Wait, he talks?

I mean, I knew some monsters could talk, but still...

The two met in battle. Azagralith caught Sha-Lau’s slashing claws with just his left hand. Although the silver wolf was larger by a size, it seemed their power was evenly matched.

No, I was wrong. While holding back Sha-Lau’s attack, Azagralith nonchalantly swiped his left hand to the side, effortlessly knocking the giant wolf away.

Seriously? Even with my most powerful familiar awakening, this was all we could do?

But Sha-Lau used magic to brake in midair and twisted to land, charging again at the black-skinned ogre. Purple lightning radiated from his body; apparently he had layered a lightning strike spell over his charge, achieving even greater acceleration.

“Interesting,” Azagralith commented, once again catching the blow head-on.

This time, the demon general used both hands. Though he couldn’t fully stop the wolf’s momentum and was pushed back, that was all. As easily as if he were swatting away a child’s hand, he sent the Phantom Wolf King flying.

“More! Show me more of your power!” Azagralith shouted, gleefully raising both hands high.

Three times Sha-Lau charged, and three times Azagralith repelled him head-on.

“What’s with this guy? Is he just playing around?”

I could only watch the battle unfold, stunned into silence.

Chapter 136: The Phantom Wolf King's Determination

“Storm Bind!”

Mia unleashed her wind binding spell on the dark ogre king, the same spell that had previously restrained the dinosaur-like monster. The moist atmosphere swirled around the black ogre, attempting to wrap and bind his limbs. However...

Azagalith curled his lips in a mocking smile, muttering words in a voice so soft it was almost inaudible.

A reddish-black aura rose from him. The moment Mia's magical bindings touched this aura, they dissolved and vanished.

Some kind of anti-magic?

Of course, an entity surpassing the divine soldier class would have countermeasures.

But that was okay. If his focus was broken for even an instant, that was enough.

“Ranged Heal!” Arisu called from just in front of the dark ogre.

Tamaki's body was enveloped in a radiant light. Immediately afterwards, the injured girl sprang up, grimacing in pain as she tried desperately to distance herself from the dark ogre.

Arisu continued to cast Ranged Heal on Tamaki.

“Tamaki, your bones?”

“I think they've healed... mostly.”

Wiping the vomit from her lips, Tamaki gripped her sword. She was clearly still in pain, but at least her limbs were moving normally.

We'd managed to avoid any immediate counterattacks, which meant we had dodged the worst-case scenario.

Meanwhile, Sha-Lau charged again, clashing with Azagralith.

"Well played," I murmured.

The ogre king smirked. Maybe he found our desperate resistance quite amusing.

Damn it, laughing at us like that!

"Incinerate!"

Rushia unleashed a Rank 8 Fire spell upon the horde of ogres pursuing Arisu, and they writhed in agony in what must have felt like hellfire. They probably had some magic resistance, but the might of a Rank 8 spell tore through their magical defenses.

Two of the ogres fell, literally melted.

Good. Only five wounded ogres and one mage remained. Suddenly, the mage ogre stopped, raised his staff skyward, and soared into the air.

Planning to save himself? We can ignore him, then.

"Rushia, can you take care of the small fries?"

"Yep. Incinerate."

All five of the injured ogres, who were still trying to strike at Arisu, were laid waste by the flames. Now, only the mage ogre and Azagralith were left.

But that "only" was the real problem.

"I'm going in!"

Her recovery complete, Tamaki charged at the Ogre King.

Azagralith swatted away the doggedly attacking Sha-Lau with his left hand, catching Tamaki's slashing attack effortlessly with his right.

Between Tamaki's silver sword and Azagralith's palm, a red haze appeared.

Some kind of mana shield? I wondered. The aura definitely looked magical, giving off a vibe that reminded me of inner energy techniques.

Wait, is he seriously fighting unarmed? Is this him at full strength, or is he underestimating us?

If it was the latter, I wanted to think of it as an opportunity.

“Kazu, watch out!”

At Mia’s warning, I looked up to see the mage ogre releasing a barrage of icy blades from above. This was the chilling Ice Magic we had endured yesterday.

“Reflection!” I cried, but my timing was off, and the ice storm hit me directly. I shielded my face with my hands, but my cheeks, arms, stomach, and legs were slashed all over.

Damn it! But this is nothing.

“Mia, knock him down!”

“Hmm. Gravity!”

Mia’s spell forcefully dragged the mage ogre down to the ground. The purple-robed giant stumbled and crawled a few steps. And then...

“Incinerate!”

“Lightning Arrow!”

The mage ogre writhed in pain, but after a while, his resistance ceased. The demonic mage finally perished and transformed into three blue gems.

Good, we’re all set.

“Let’s fall back! This way!”

At my signal, everyone, including Tamaki and Arisu, quickly turned around.

I quickly checked my watch to see that it had been five minutes since I’d used Familiar Awakening.

“Sha-Lau, just a little longer!”

“Got it.”

The Phantom Wolf King stubbornly kept Azagralith at bay. His entire body was covered in wounds, but he still managed to dodge the fatal blows and held his own against the massive black ogre. For now, that would have to be enough.

With Sha-Lau covering our rear, we took off at full speed on Fly. It was a gamble. As I soared through the wind, I glanced again at my watch.

“Using your familiar as bait to escape, huh? How cowardly,” Azagralith jeered at us.

Looking back, I saw Sha-Lau roar as his body was enveloped in a red aura that looked a lot like the ogre king’s mana shield.

“Well, fine. I’ll crush this one, then chase after you,” Azagralith declared, readying himself for Sha-Lau’s impending assault.

Five seconds... four... three... two... one...

Sha-Lau lunged so fast that he left an afterimage in his wake. Azagralith lowered his stance, extending his left hand in preparation to fend off the strike.

As I desperately tried to put distance between the ogre warlord and myself, I couldn’t help but grin. “Time’s up!” I called out to him.

The very next moment, the form of the Phantom Wolf King vanished into thin air.

For a moment, Azagralith had no idea what to do. But that had been the plan all along. Exactly 320 seconds since I’d cast Familiar Awakening, the special ability had expired, sending Sha-Lau back. And this distracted Azagralith for a few precious seconds, during which time we gained a hundred meters of distance.

“You little...!”

Enraged, the pitch-black ogre roared and gave chase with incredible speed. With every step Azagralith took, plumes of dust erupted from the ground.

The gap between us closed rapidly. He’d probably catch up before we made it into the woods. But even this was part of the plan.

“Tamaki!”

“On it!”

Twisting her body in the air, Tamaki dropped down to face Azagralith head-on. As she let out a fierce battle cry, her silvery blade elongated.

The ogre parried her strike with a casual swing of his right hand.

“Futile effort, little girl.”

“Not so fast,” Tamaki retorted, leaping backward.

Azagralith immediately closed the distance between them, and the two emerged in an open area: a schoolyard. They stood on a playground in front of a once-grand school building that had been reduced to rubble.

And beneath this ground was...

A space that Arisu and Mia had just inspected. A space with a mysterious mural.

The two had seen something important there. Something that shouldn't be in a school. And there were so many of them. Well, to be frank, in Japan, such a sight was inconceivable now.

Because it was a cache of bombs.

“Gravity!”

Mia's gravitational magic pressed down on Azagralith. It would probably be broken in an instant, but all they needed was that split second.

Tamaki soared into the air.

“We can do it! Go for it!”

“All right then. Here goes!”

Mia firmly pressed a palm-sized switch she held in her right hand.

A deep, resonating sound echoed from below.

After a beat, the entire playground was enveloped in a cloud of dust.

“Damn... A trap?!” Azagralith's angry shout could be heard over the sound of the explosions erupting from every side.

This probably wouldn't kill him. However, we'd caught the cautious ogre king off guard, buying ourselves some time.

For the moment, Azagralith couldn't see a meter from out in front of him, which meant we would have just enough time to deploy a teleportation gate to

get out of there.

Just then, I looked up to see a hawk swiftly descending from the sky.

“It’s Leen-san’s familiar!” I shouted.

She must have summoned another familiar right after the previous one was shot down. We patiently waited for the right moment.

It was Rushia who had suggested this strategy in the White Room. “*Leen would do it this way,*” she’d said with confidence. She had asked us to draw Azagralith’s attention, giving Leen’s familiar the opportunity it needed.

To be honest, I’d had my doubts.

However, just as Arisu and I were linked by a strong bond, Rushia and Leen were connected in some mysterious way. With that in mind, the plan didn’t seem so bad after all. And just like Rushia had said, here was the hawk. As soon as it landed in front of us, the pale blue circle of a teleportation gate materialized on the ground.

“Everyone, jump in!”

Mia and Rushia leaped into the gate, their figures vanishing one after the other. Then came Arisu, followed quickly by Tamaki, who had just regrouped with us.

A quick glance back at the playground revealed a dark silhouette roaring amidst the explosion. Its terrifying scream sent chills down my spine.

This is bad, I thought, still overwhelmed by Azagralith’s menacing aura. *Has he finally decided to get serious? Was he just playing with us before?*

But that was his mistake. We had won the gamble.

Finally, the hulking ogre emerged from the dust cloud as if transformed into a dark whirlwind.

A light gleamed from the tips of his fingers, and an instant later, a beam grazed my shoulder, splattering blood. Pain contorted my face.

In a rush, I dove into the pale blue circle.

The last thing I saw of Azagralith was him laughing heartily, looking genuinely delighted by the fact that I'd managed to outsmart him.

"I'm looking forward to our next encounter!" he called after me.

That's when it dawned on me.

He's a battle junkie.

And with that, the teleportation blackout took over my consciousness.

Chapter 137: Teleportation

Survival was key. You've got to live to fight another day.

We all made it out alive.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in the familiar clearing within the tree cave. The magical circle at our feet faded.

I looked to my left and right and saw that everyone was safe—Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and Rushia. But Tamaki, perhaps not fully recovered from her injuries, rested one knee on the ground while Arisu cast a Healing spell on her.

Our eyes met.

"We did it, Kazu! We're back!" Tamaki exclaimed with a bright smile.

"Yeah, we sure did," I replied.

Tamaki's radiant grin was a stark contrast to the dire battle we'd just endured. It was as if the harrowing confrontation with a terrifying enemy had already slipped from her mind.

Then I winced, clutching my shoulder. The adrenaline had probably worn off because the pain from where Azagralith's beam had struck was flaring up.

"Kazu, I'll heal you now!" Arisu offered.

"No, treat Tamaki first. I'll—" I began, but then the room buzzed with commotion. Guards were pushed aside as a familiar face hurriedly entered the clearing.

It was Leen. "Rushia!"

Her face lit up upon seeing Rushia safe and sound. She dashed over and wrapped her in a tight embrace. Her yellow tail wagged joyfully, and the cat ears atop her head quivered with emotion.

Such expressive features, I thought, not for the first time.

Mia looked like she wanted to join the hug, but I grabbed her by the collar to hold her back.

“Aw, Kazu, you spoil-sport!” She pouted, but I ignored her glare.

Why do I have to hold her back, especially when my shoulder still hurts so much?

“Leen, we’re all safe. Sorry for the worry,” Rushia said, her voice gentle.

“I’m so relieved! Rushia, I was so worried...” Leen buried her face in Rushia’s chest, her voice cracking with emotion. Finally, the cat-eared girl looked something closer to her age.

Although, I realized, from what I’ve heard, Leen’s quite a bit older than she looks...

In any case, their reunion warmed my heart—and it wasn’t just because they were clearly close. Rushia was part of our team now, and if Leen cared this much about her, it meant she cared about our success, too.

However, as I watched them embrace, a thought struck me.

Despite the massive differences in their backgrounds and races, their bond seemed unbreakable. That first time we’d met them, I’d thought Leen had been treating Rushia as expendable by sending her with us. Yet, here she was, seemingly best friends with the young leader of the People of Light. I wondered what their relationship had been like before we met them.

“It’s like a yuri scene,” Mia muttered cheekily.

“Quiet,” I retorted, flicking her forehead lightly.

Well, it doesn’t matter, I thought. Whatever their history, it doesn’t really concern us now.

Maybe someday I’d ask Rushia about it. I wondered if she’d share such private information.

“Sorry for the wait, Kazu. I’ll heal you now,” Arisu said, rushing over to cast a Healing spell on my shoulder.

The pain instantly began to subside, and I sighed, finally feeling a moment's peace.

"Good job, Kazu-kun," said a familiar voice.

Amidst the whirlwind that was Leen's entrance, I hadn't even noticed our committee chair, Shiki, standing in the hall. She raised a hand in greeting, but there was a noticeable weariness about her, and dark circles shadowed her eyes.

"Shiki-san... you look like you haven't slept."

"Well, there was a lot to figure out before everyone left. I pulled an all-nighter," she admitted with a tired smile.

"So, everyone's gone..."

"Yeah. Fortunately, everything seems to be going smoothly so far. I'm planning to get some sleep now," she said, punctuating her statement with a yawn.

Seeing her so unguarded made me chuckle softly.



“What’s so funny?” Shiki huffed. “You know, I’ve been really worried about all of you.”

“I’m sorry. But as you can see, we’re all safe and sound,” I replied, trying to make my tone sound reassuring.

“That’s a relief. By the way, want to know where the doppelgänger is?”

“We can talk about that later,” I said, shaking my head. Judging from Shiki’s demeanor, they had things under control with the creature. This didn’t surprise me at all; I’d always found Shiki could be trusted with things like that.

“What about your MP?” she suddenly asked.

I shrugged. “I’m running on empty. The others still have a bit left in reserve, though.”

“All right, then. Rest up until you’re fully recharged,” Shiki advised.

“You sure? The others are still out there fighting.”

“You guys are our trump cards. You need to save your strength until you’re ready. Got it?”

I nodded. “Makes sense. There’s not much I can do without my MP anyway. I guess it’s time for a break.”

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Now, about the laptop I’d managed to salvage from my room—its battery was at 0 percent. I knew that the CAC group had taken a generator with them when they escaped through the teleportation gate. Maybe I could use that. Apparently, Yuuki was out leading the charge, so I would definitely need a computer to see what was on the USB drive.

I could put it off, but... I couldn’t help but be curious. Especially about that mysterious space beneath our school grounds and the explosives stashed there. The entire setup nagged at the back of my mind.

Yuuki-senpai... What did he find out? What was he thinking? And what was he trying to tell us?

Shiki told Sumire, a good friend of Arisu and Tamaki, to take care of anything that came up, then went off to rest. When I asked her about the generator, Sumire was more than happy to help.

“Sure, I’ll show you where we’ve set up our makeshift office,” she said as she set off gingerly across the treetop city.

Rushia stayed behind, telling us she would give a report to Leen. And so, the other four of us followed Sumire. Her footing was unstable, and as she walked across the first bridge, she terrified me by almost falling off twice.

As I looked out at the treetop city, it seemed busier than usual. Every member of the Light Tribe that I saw wore a serious expression, and I remembered that they were already engaged in the final battle that would determine their fate. The World Tree was their final stronghold; the other two locations had been handed over to the enemy, ready to be detonated. The objective was clear: defend this place and reclaim the lost territory. If they failed today, the humans of this world would be eradicated. But I wondered how much of this the Light People knew. Maybe they’d just been told enough to know the gravity of today’s battle.

Eventually, we reached a comparatively smaller tree, its platform piled so high with equipment that much of it looked ready to fall off. By the way the Light People avoided the tree, casting suspicious glances at the loud generator, we could immediately tell this was our destination. Hearing the hum of machinery and seeing the glow of electronics in this magical realm created a stark contrast, reminding us of the intertwined fates of both worlds.

Still, it was good to see the generator running smoothly. I wasn’t sure how much fuel they had on hand, but given the heavy usage, it would probably only last a day or two.

Inside the hollow of the tree, three non-combatant CAC members were wrestling with paperwork under the steady light of a magic lamp. They looked up, and their faces brightened when they saw us.

“Kazu-senpai! I’m glad you’re safe,” one of them greeted me.

“Thanks. Why are you guys doing paperwork here, of all places?”

“We’re putting together information from the reconnaissance teams and summarizing what’s happened up to this point. Shiki wanted it to be ready for you to review when you got back.”

Hmm, that’s helpful, I thought. The three went on to explain that they hadn’t expected us back so soon, so it would be a bit longer before the papers were ready. I assured them that was okay; my MP would take an hour and a half to recover anyway.

Before I could ask, Sumire pulled out a power cord that led back to the generator.

“See if this will work for your laptop. I hope it starts up at all... considering it took a hit from that mage ogre’s magic.”

“Let’s see... I think it’ll be okay.”

Thankfully, my laptop booted up without any issues. As I placed it on a wooden table and watched the startup screen, Mia peeked over curiously.

“Where’s the erotic stuff? Show it to your big sister!”

“I don’t have any of that,” I told her with a sigh.

Who’s calling herself a big sister anyway? I’d better set up a password later. Although, given that we only have a few days of power, that might be pointless.

I inserted the USB stick we’d found in the basement, and a folder opened to reveal a long list of files: plain text files, Excel spreadsheets, Word documents...

Huh...

“What if we couldn’t open them because the versions weren’t compatible? Wouldn’t that be a laugh?”

“Ugh, don’t even joke about that, Kazu-kun!”

Luckily, there were no issues opening up the files. The Word document seemed to be about a construction project, with budgets in embedded Excel sheets. A quick skim showed it was nothing relevant to us.

The Excel sheets went into more specifics about finances... Yeah, probably not what we needed either.

The real mystery was the text file, the most recently modified file on the flash drive. I decided to open it with my trusted free software editor.

I immediately recognized the concise style as something Yuuki had probably written. It began with explanations of the Word and Excel files. As expected, these were for the underground construction project. Originally commissioned as a reservoir, it had later been repurposed as a storage space.

If that was all there was to it, it probably wasn't a big deal. Even the concealed entrance made sense if it was supposed to be some secret storage for students... But was that really all there was to it?

What had really caught my attention were those characters on the wall, resembling some sort of magical script and matching the snakelike inscriptions we'd seen on the stone pillars...

Ah, I messed up. I should've shown Leen-san the photos that Mia-chan took.

"Maybe we should show them to her now?" she suggested.

"Yeah, that might be a good idea. If we can find someone to take us back to her place..."

"I remember the way. I'll handle it." With that, Mia dashed off.

So impulsive, I thought, shaking my head. Still, I had faith she'd manage.

"Do you think Mia might jump onto the ears of a random stranger or something?" Tamaki whispered, anxious.

"I, um, think Mia will behave," I said, and I wanted so badly to believe it.

"You sure about that?"

"We have to trust Mia-chan."

"*Can* we trust her, though?" Arisu asked, tilting her head in doubt. Even though I secretly agreed with her, I decided to stop thinking about it.

Instead, I looked back at my laptop screen, where the rest of the document recorded Yuuki's questions.

Why is that thing here? What on earth is it?

There were several wild theories, but I couldn't find the humor in any of them.

"Um, I'm not quite sure what he's getting at... but maybe I'm just tired," Tamaki said. She was the first to express what we all felt.

Well, that's understandable, I thought. We've skimmed through the most important information.

"Let's take a little nap. Maybe lie down for half an hour?"

"Sure, go ahead," Sumire said. "It might be a little noisy, though... Here are some eye masks and ear plugs." As she handed them to us, she pointed to a pile of sheets in the corner.

Summoning sheets turned into makeshift futons... Well, that should work.

"Yay! I'll take Kazu-san's right side! Arisu, you get the left!"

"Really, Tamaki-chan..."

The three of us lay down in a row on the pure white futons and closed our eyes.

In no time, I felt my consciousness slipping into darkness.

Chapter 138: The Offensive Operation's Status

I was woken by the sound of the thirty-minute timer I'd set. To either side of me, Arisu and Tamaki lifted their heads groggily and rubbed their eyes.

"Oh, so cute, both of you."

"Good morning," Tamaki said mid-yawn.

"Huh?... Oh, Kazu-san," Arisu murmured.

It was clear neither of them was fully awake yet. I gently stroked their sleep-disheveled hair, then shook my head to shake off my own drowsiness.

Glancing at the wall clock, I saw it had been about an hour since we'd arrived here—which meant I had another thirty minutes or so before my MP would be fully recharged.

Just then, a soft laugh came from behind me. Turning around, I saw Sumire standing right behind us.

"Oh... sorry," I apologized.

"Are you guys getting all lovey-dovey? Don't worry, it's fine, as long as you keep it PG. We need you in high spirits to fight, Kazu-kun. Last night was really tough, especially for me."

I couldn't help being impressed that despite the life-or-death situation that had separated us the day before, they'd still strategized for today—moving forward with the mission, believing we'd return.

"Okay, this summarizes everything up until this morning," Sumire announced, handing me a small bundle of about five typed pages.

Indeed, everything that had happened in the past twelve hours or so was listed in bullet-point format.

"Thanks, this helps a lot." *So much faster than being verbally briefed.*

“You’re welcome,” Sumire replied with a smile, and it was only then that I noticed the dark circles still under her eyes and her still-sunken cheeks.

She must be exhausted... I thought. Understandable, given all the work she’s put in. I should read these documents with gratitude. And even if I come up with a joke about her losing a bit of weight from all the stress, I’d better keep it to myself...

“I wonder if I’ve lost any weight after all this work,” Sumire pondered aloud, pinching her belly over her gym clothes.

She really knows how to roast herself.

“Sumire-chan, it’s probably because you stress-eat...” Tamaki suggested.

“You should exercise! Come swing swords with me!” Arisu chimed in enthusiastically.

That might not be the best idea.

While the trio of best friends continued their lively discussion of Sumire’s weight, I started reading through the documents.

I see, I see...

The first bullet point was about the doppelgängers. Keiko, who’d come through the teleportation gate to the World Tree, had quickly killed them with a silver sword, confirming their blue blood.

After that, she’d demanded proof of identity from every student, having them prick their fingertips and checking the color of their blood. She wouldn’t let anyone refuse.

Later investigations found two doppelgängers disguised as high school students, both of which were eliminated. Fortunately, no doppelgängers were found among the CAC group. Probably because they simply hadn’t had a chance to replace anyone.

The only ones who consistently acted in small groups were people like us. As for Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia, they were probably too powerful for any creature to impersonate.

Next, a meeting between Leen, Yuuki, and Shiki led to a doppelgänger examination across the entire population of the Light Tribe.

A total of eleven individuals were revealed to have blue blood. They immediately died—or rather, they committed suicide either right before or right after being exposed. It seemed doppelgängers were truly hardened assassins.

Fortunately, those who'd been replaced were mostly low-ranking soldiers, and it seemed the doppelgängers hadn't managed to infiltrate the government.

Moreover, the details of this significant counteroffensive had been successfully kept secret until the end. Other nations immediately conducted similar examinations, ensuring similar secrecy, and every one of them had at least a few doppelgängers among their ranks.

It blew my mind to think that these horrifying spies had gone undetected for so long. Why hadn't anyone noticed the doppelgängers until now?

Maybe the monsters executed their plans too perfectly. Or maybe the doppelgängers hadn't been around for very long? That would explain how they'd managed to go undetected.

It would also explain why we'd been the ones to discover them. Perhaps we were too powerful for them. The doppelgängers might have been desperate, deciding they had to eliminate us at all costs. After all, up until now, the Demon King's army had seemed to be on a winning streak. And so they'd experienced a loss, gotten rattled, and slipped up. To be fair, this was something that could've happened to anyone.

Note to self: We can't always be on a winning streak. There will be times, like now, when we'll be struggling just to survive. In times like that, how do we maintain morale? How do we stay calm and not make things worse? We have to always be prepared for anything.

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With the doppelgänger incident, the group from another world had naturally started collaborating more closely with the Light Tribe. After all, if the

doppelgängers were to go on a rampage, it would be tough to stand up to them without our group's help. The "Ninja Duo," Yuuki and Keiko, were especially invaluable—but then again, when weren't they?

Since we'd been gone, it seemed someone else had taken charge of the high school group. Shiki had quickly taken control of the middle school group, setting up her base in this tree's hollow, activating the generator, and consolidating intel. She got a map from Leen, scanned it, edited it on the computer, and printed it out for strategy meetings. Thanks to her efforts, today's strategy was incredibly well crafted—much to the surprise of the leaders of various nations.

It really is incredible what that girl can do, I thought.

It would be ideal if everyone from my world could seamlessly integrate into the armies of different nations and fight effectively. But without proper coordination, even the most powerful of units could be rendered ineffective.

In our battle against the arachnae, we'd taken the audacious step of going after the enemy's commander, just the five of us. But that had been possible because of our far superior skills. Plus, the Light Tribe had adapted on the fly, buying us time.

Of course, Shiki and her team understood this. They'd carefully planned today's strategy to avoid relying on the Ninja Duo. Still, they knew it would be challenging for this hastily formed alliance to coordinate perfectly.

We, the fighters summoned from another world, were divided into high school and middle school groups, each acting as reserve troops in a different area. The high schoolers headed to the Underground Temple of Rown, while the middle schools were dispatched to the Storm Temple in Gal Yass.

While the high schoolers had greater numbers, the overall combat readiness of the middle school group was superior. However, the high school group had Yuuki and Keiko, which quite likely made them the more formidable force in terms of total annihilation capability.

The plan seemed to be that if one group faced difficulties, they'd pour all their resources into assisting the other. Of course, this had been the strategy without the four of us. With us back at the World Tree, we'd naturally become the primary reinforcements.

And so here we were, waiting to be sent where we might be needed. Leen and everyone else were managing the teleportation network well, from what I could see. Communications also seemed to be mostly stable at the moment, allowing them to monitor the battle situation closely. I found out that wireless devices had been distributed to each commander, which made a huge difference—while the devices weren't very effective in the forest, they certainly proved their worth up in the canopy. In any case, they were certainly more efficient than using familiars to relay information.

“Hey, Kazu-san, how's it looking?” Tamaki asked.

“It seems to be going smoothly for now,” I replied.

“That's good to hear!” She shot me a relieved grin.

Although things were going smoothly, there must have been casualties, and it might just be because the enemy's god-tier soldiers hadn't shown up yet. But I didn't share my concerns with Tamaki, not wanting to worry her unnecessarily.

I'd been thinking about this yesterday, too; if god-tier soldiers appeared, Keiko, who lacked offensive skills, would be at a disadvantage. She was probably best suited for dealing with lower-ranked enemies. But then again, considering that for a Greater Ninja, “lower-ranked” means elite orcs and ogres, this was a bit absurd. Even so, I suspected she'd struggle against anything above the level of an Orc General. And when it came to god-tier soldiers, equivalent to Rank 9 and around Level 40... I doubted she'd even leave a scratch.

Against enemies like that, assembling a bunch of lower-leveled fighters wouldn't help; they'd be wiped out in an instant. Our most reliable force among the high school students was probably Yuuki. As for the middle school, Sakura Nagatsuki might just make the cut. However, I was unsure of her current strength... It seemed inevitable that we would need to step in today.

“It's about time,” Sumire said, and I followed her gaze to the clock on the wall. “Shiki-senpai said to wake her up when it's time. She's sleeping in the tree next to us, so I'll go get her.”

“Wait,” I interjected before Sumire could dash off. She stopped herself so fast that she almost toppled over. Fortunately, Arisu was there to catch and steady her.

“I’ll go,” I said. “Arisu, come with me. Tamaki, can you wait here for Mia and Rushia?”

“Got it! Leave it to me!” Tamaki replied energetically.

I exchanged a glance with Arisu. I’d been hoping to have a frank discussion with Shiki, just the two of us. Arisu seemed to understand my intent as she gave a small nod.

As we stepped out of the CAC group’s temporary command center, Arisu turned to me with a pleading expression.

“If you’re planning on playing any... risqué pranks on Shiki-senpai, maybe... maybe you shouldn’t,” she whispered.

“I won’t,” I reassured her, a little surprised. Apparently, our silent communication had not conveyed my intentions clearly. I sighed.

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The tree next door was slightly smaller, and a gray cloth hung over the entrance of the hollow, concealing its interior. Arisu gestured for me to wait outside and gently pulled back the curtain to enter. She soon reappeared, accompanied by Shiki.

“Oh? Kazu-kun, were you hoping to catch a glimpse of me when I’d just woken up?” she teased with a sarcastic smile.

I just looked at her in exasperation, but I figured at least she was feeling good enough to joke around.

Chapter 139: Reconnaissance Thanks to Leen's Familiar

When I told Shiki about Sumire's report, she nodded in satisfaction and put her hands on her hips. "I don't really have anything to add. What about you?"

As we crossed a bridge high in the trees, I ran through what had happened to us since we'd last met—most importantly, Yuuki's note about the cave under the high school campus.

"He didn't mention a word about that to me," she remarked.

"Maybe it wasn't urgent," I said. "Maybe he was planning to tell you after the battle today. Or maybe he just forgot."

She smirked. "That ninja? Forgot? Highly unlikely."

When I told her about our intense encounter with Azagralith, one of the Four Heavenly Kings, her response was rather cheeky. "I'm impressed you made it out alive."

"Tamaki-chan nearly met her end."

"And yet, you all made it back here. Quite commendable." Although her words were sincere, her tone seemed a little too casual.

We soon reached the tree hollow that Leen called home. A brightly colored cloth was draped over the entrance, serving as a door. After a brief exchange with a guard, we were granted entry.

The inside layout was familiar. Leen, Rushia, and Mia were all there; Leen and Rushia sat across from each other, comfortably perched on cushions.

Meanwhile, Mia was happily fondling Leen's tail, a picture of pure bliss.



“Hmm, pure bliss, pure bliss indeed...”

“You! I thought you weren’t coming back... How many times have I told you not to pet her tail?”

“Oops, Kazu! I just remembered something I have to do. Bye!”

“Arisu. Haste!”

“On it! I’ll catch her.”

Before Mia could escape like a frightened rabbit, Arisu, enveloped in a bright red glow, caught up with her. She grabbed Mia by the scruff of her neck, lifted her up like a mischievous cat, and brought her back to Shiki and me.”I didn’t mean to hurt her, meow!”

“I told you, doing stuff like that could cause a diplomatic incident!”

“But Leen said it was okay!”

I turned to Leen and bowed deeply in apology. She chuckled and replied, “It’s okay, as long as you know she meant no harm. But it *is* a little embarrassing for a man to see someone pet my tail.”

“So, you want me to pet it more?” Mia asked.

“Mia, for someone as smart as you, there are times when I don’t understand what you’re saying.” I retorted.

The leader of the Light Tribe looked puzzled. I thought about explaining the cultural nuances of “push and pull” but chose to remain silent instead. Shiki tapped Mia lightly on the forehead.

“Show some restraint.”

“Yes, Boss!”

Hey, I’m supposed to be your boss! She’ll really do anything for Shiki-san, won’t she... Well, to be fair, Shiki-san does seem scarier when she is angry.

“Have a seat, everyone. Let’s go over what we know,” Leen said, waving for us to join the circle of cushions on the floor.

In the center of the circle was a shallow tub, reaching half a meter off the floor and filled with water.

“First things first, now that we know where Azagralith is, we’ve been able to confirm the locations of all four of the Demon Lord’s generals.”

The four generals, also known as the Four Heavenly Kings.

There are three more like him, aren’t there? I thought with a sinking feeling, remembering how narrowly we’d managed to escape Azagralith.

How much will we have to sacrifice to defeat such a creature?

“Fortunately, they’re not in the Storm Temple of Gal Yass or the Underground Temple of Rown.”

“That’s a relief.”

“One is at the Holy City Akasha, one is at the Spire of Haluran, and another is at the mountain your school is on. The last one was discovered by the division attacking the World Tree.”

That’s a bit worrying, I thought. Well, as for the first two, if the defense forces go kamikaze... maybe they could be taken out?

The real problem was that another entity of Azagralith’s caliber was approaching the World Tree.

“Up until now, they haven’t been able to break through the barrier of the World Tree. Although they’re gradually taking control of the outer regions, as long as we remain in retreat, they can’t harm the main body of the World Tree.”

I see, so the Light Tribe has the upper hand in this defensive battle. But if their defenses are gradually being eroded outside this central area, there’s no room for complacency.

Leen stared intently at the water bucket in our midst and began reciting a spell.

The water inside rippled, and on its surface appeared an image of soldiers fighting monsters under storm clouds.

It looked like an aerial view.

“This is what my familiar sees,” Leen explained.

This looks kind of like Remote Viewing, I thought, but it’s different. I don’t think I could do something quite like this...

While we became stronger by simply acquiring abilities, we couldn’t adapt or modify those abilities. This was both a strength and a limitation of the White Room system, but the system seemed especially pronounced when it came to magic.

In matters of combat, there were certain aspects that could be bluffed or worked around. However, in terms of non-combat magic, it seemed that trained magicians like Leen, who had dedicated themselves to honing their craft, had a clear advantage.

“This is the diversionary unit heading to the Storm Temple of Gal Yass,” Leen explained as we watched the soldiers on the water.

They were clad in full armor and engaged in fierce combat with orcs, hobgoblins—some green-skinned monsters we’d never seen before—and bipedal lizard-like creatures. As it swept across the battlefield, the hawk’s-eye view revealed a grim scene—the numbers on both sides were immense, and as soldiers and monsters fell, neither side gave an inch.

Then the view shifted forward, revealing a distant structure shrouded in thunderclouds. This had to be the Storm Temple. With the temple surrounded by imposing walls, it was hard to make out the details, but its sheer size was unmistakable. The building occupied an entire hill and must have been the size of a small village.

Lightning struck the ground around the temple relentlessly. This was going to be no fun to approach head-on. But perhaps protective magic could provide a solution?

“To shield yourselves from that lightning, you can wear these amulets,” Leen said, presenting us with necklaces. Each one was adorned with a rainbow-colored crystal the size of our thumbs.

“There’s six... Four for us and...?”

“Maybe one for me?” Shiki speculated, taking a necklace and draping it around her neck. The fleeting sight of her elegant neck was enticing. While I was lost in thought, Arisu, who was sitting next to me, nudged my thigh.

“Wh-What is it, Arisu-san?”

“Um... nothing. Never mind.” She turned her face away with a huff.

It was a pleasure to feel a hint of jealousy in the air.

As this thought crossed my mind, Mia made a conspicuous cough. “Ahem. Let’s get back on track.”

“Way to read the room, Mia.”

“Besides, Kazu’s MP should be almost full by now.”

She was right, of course.

From what we could see on the water, Leen’s familiar seemed to be searching for something. Eventually, the view stabilized and descended, revealing a group of girls in gym uniforms.

Ah, it must be looking for the CAC group, I realized.

One girl looked up, holding up a spear for the hawk to land on.

It was Sakura Nagatsuki. “Yukino-senpai, we’ve discovered a divine-class soldier coming to the west side of the battlefield,” she told us.

Wow, this spell can transmit sound, too? But the ambient noise was filtered out, and I wondered if it had a selective listening function.

“Can we communicate directly with this?” I asked Leen. On the water, Sakura narrowed her eyes in what looked like amusement.

“Is that you, Kazu-senpai?”

Her slightly muffled voice reminded me of a phone call, and I no longer needed Leen to answer my question.

“Yeah, it’s me. We all got back safely. What about your group?”

“As of now, we have zero casualties.”

I wished she wouldn't sound so formal with "casualties." But I understood they had to be prepared for anything in this place.

"Sakura, about that divine-class soldier you mentioned..."

"The information is still mixed..." Sakura's gaze shifted to the side as she conferred with someone else.

"Update: the unit deployed to the west is currently fighting two Mekish Grau."

"Seriously?"

Ugh, two of those things at once. Can the people of this country handle it?

Well, the allied forces should have brought in their elite troops. Maybe they would even have a unit comparable to ours, one capable of defeating a divine-class soldier.

"This doesn't look good. Is the western front doomed?" Leen asked bluntly.

Okay, so they don't have that kind of power after all.

"Is it our turn?" I asked Leen.

"Please."

I exchanged nods with Arisu, Mia, and Rushia before standing up.

"I'm going, too," Shiki declared as she rose from her seat. "It's not like I've suddenly lost all my fear and want to fight the Mekish Grau," she added seeing my surprised expression. "I'll just be there to lead the CAC group. It'll be easier for you, Kazu-kun, to fight with me behind you."

That's quite the confidence she has.

But to be honest, it would be a lot easier for me if she would just lead from behind. Making life-and-death decisions all the time was becoming unexpectedly stressful.

I wish I hadn't noticed that.

Just an hour ago, I'd had to take a short nap because I was so exhausted. I should have been several times tougher than an average person because of all those level-ups.

“Well, shall we go to the Storm Temple?”

Inside, I was calculating how to fight *two* Mekish Grau, but on the outside, I nodded with feigned optimism.

Hmm, but seriously, taking on two of those monsters...

I'll have to think about it.

Chapter 140: The Thundering Wasteland

We received backpacks from Sumire and the others. Inside were the predictable binoculars, cameras, and knives, along with emergency rations—among which were some chocolate-based snacks, which we were generously allowed to share with others despite the limited supply.

“It’s for establishing communication with the local soldiers and commanders. I’ll be happy if you use it effectively,” Shiki explained. As it turned out, she had done just that last night, gaining the trust of her lower-ranking soldiers. And we’d seen it ourselves; there was no denying the power of sweet bribery. I pretended not to notice Rushia staring intently at the sweets.



After the teleportation, with its now-familiar dizziness, we landed in a wasteland where a damp, unpleasant wind blew relentlessly. The air was chilly, and a faint rotting smell carried on the breeze.

Beneath the dark clouds to the north, on a small hill, stood a structure surrounded by high walls. So, this was the Storm Temple of Gal Yass. The place had an indescribable and intimidating aura that only became clear once you saw it in person.

Over the temple loomed a cloud as black as night, unleashing bolt after bolt of lightning. Before we left the World Tree, I’d heard a rumor that this cloud was stationed over the temple all year round. In any case, this was a powerful mana spot; it served as proof that this was one of the five wedges that anchored this continent, once said to be under the sea, to the surface. It was a Temple of the Divine Wedge.

Five years ago, this place had held a value similar to the World Tree, but then it had fallen into the hands of monsters. Since then, we’d been told, the monsters had been fortifying their defenses around it. The Temple of the

Wedge was a vital component of their plan. However, they hadn't deformed this land like they did everywhere else they conquered.

"Maybe they couldn't pollute it," Leen had speculated. "The power of the Temple of the Wedge might be preventing it from being transformed into another realm."

We had never seen land that had undergone such a transformation, so we couldn't comment. Still, I had an ominous feeling that sooner or later we would see it. But those thoughts could be saved for later.

"From here, the CAC group is about two kilometers northwest. Let's go there first," Shiki instructed. "Once we meet up with them, I'll swap with Sakura-chan."

"So, you're saying we should add Nagatsuki-san to our group?"

"Considering that we're up against two divine-class opponents, it'll be extremely helpful to have her with us, even if it's just to deflect attacks." Shiki's words were cold and calculating, devoid of emotion.

Without answering her, I cast Deflection on Mia, who then used Fly, and we all ascended into the sky.

"Wait, say something," Shiki nudged me.

"I don't want to use her as a pawn," I replied.

"She's not weak enough to be a pawn now. Her Spearmanship's at Rank 7."

"What? Seriously? How many monsters has she defeated?"

"Last night, we'd made a plan to destroy the monsters that had made it to the edge of the forest. She volunteered to participate, and she got remarkable results."

"Volunteered, huh..."

Sakura had always been reckless. So, although this was very much like her, it was still worrying. Was her hatred for monsters driving her to be more impulsive than normal?



I was also surprised to hear her Spearmanship had reached Rank 7. But was that enough to challenge a divine-class opponent? Yesterday, when we'd faced a Mekish Grau, Arisu's Spearmanship had been Rank 6, and Tamaki's Swordsmanship had been Rank 8. Arisu had struggled to provide support, and Tamaki, the main attacker, had seemed to have a hard time as well.

>"Still, we'll go with just the five of us. Don't worry. If things get too tough, we'll fall back," I assured Shiki.

"Got it. The CAC group will support the main unit after the elite troops have come into the temple," Shiki explained, slightly lifting the amulet around her neck. "If you sense that the elite troops are struggling inside, I want you to help them. Otherwise, your job will be to cut down the most powerful enemies outside."

"You're quite demanding," I remarked.

"You're our strongest force," she replied with a grin. "I'll make full use of you."

We exchanged looks and shrugged.

"I hope you can handle Mekish Grau easily," she added.

"That's a tall order," I sighed. Considering that not all enemies of the divine class were Mekish Grau, this was a natural hope for a commander to have... but still.

"I know it's a lot to ask. Just think of it as the ideal scenario. If you think it's too dangerous, don't hold back—use all the power you've got."

"Yeah, I get it. We have a few trump cards, but playing all of them might be risky." After all, both our group and the Light Tribe's army were in the same boat. If this continent fell, everyone would die.

No matter how reckless it may seem, we have to do what we have to do.

Shiki gently patted my shoulder. Considering that a couple of days ago she'd trembled just being near me, this massive change was impressive. But then...

"If this strategy works out, I might give you a reward," she teased with a mischievous grin.

“A reward? What kind of reward?”

“Well, there are beauties from various nations who’ve expressed interest in joining your harem...”

“No, thanks. And you do realize what you’re suggesting, right?” I asked, shooting her an annoyed glare.

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At the place Shiki took us to, there were only three girls from the CAC group. The rest had gone to intercept the monsters coming from the north-northwest. Thanks to Mekish Grau pair’s rampage, the troops holding back the monsters from that side had been decimated, and the battlefield was spiraling dangerously into a chain reaction.

“Hmm, so much experience just waiting out there. I’m jealous,” Mia muttered.

“I mean, we’d like to gain some experience too,” Rushia noted.

“I get that, but we also have to raise the CAC girls’ levels,” I pointed out.

“Ugh, I wish we could steal all that experience,” Mia grumbled.

“It’s not a game, you know. Time and monsters are both limited,” Arisu reminded her.

“If we can help everyone level up, it would make things easier for us,” I mused. “Especially if Sakura reaches Rank 8—that would be a game changer.”

“We should do what only we can do.” Arisu nodded in agreement. “That’s the only way we can win... and survive... together.”

“Be careful, everyone,” Shiki said as she left our group.

We nodded at her, waved to the CAC group, and took to the skies again. This time we did our best to keep a low altitude, wary of enemy detection as we headed northwest.

“Hey, Kazu, how are we going to deal with each Lord Meki?” Tamaki asked.

“*Lord Meki?*” I raised an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you’re taking a page out of Mia’s book, Tamaki.”

“Well, I have a good idea,” she began. I prepared myself for some kind of wild suggestion. “I’ll hold one of them off while the rest of you deal with the other.”

Hmm...

“That sounds reasonable, considering our strengths,” I admitted. Tamaki, with her Rank 9 Swordsmanship, was the only one of us who might stand a chance in a one-on-one fight against a god-tier enemy.

“We should try to save the Familiar Awakening,” she added.

She was right. While activating Familiar Awakening might allow us to take on the Mekish Grau with just one familiar, it would be ideal to conserve our strength, as Shiki had suggested. Currently, we had two trump cards up our sleeves: my Familiar Awakening and Rushia’s Magic Release.

“We’ll have to use either Familiar Awakening or Magic Release here,” I told the group.

“But what if...” Tamaki began.

“We might be able to defeat both Mekish Grau without using either one, but it’ll make it riskier and take longer,” I interrupted. “Ideally, we’d like to finish our battle with the god-tier enemies as soon as possible.”

The battlefield wasn’t limited to this place. We might have to send reinforcements to the Underground Temple of Rown, where the high school group was headed. If we dealt with the situation here quickly, it could make a big difference in the overall success of our mission.

“But the high school group has ninjas, right?” Tamaki argued.

“Ninjas can’t fix everything. And Keiko can’t be counted on for boss fights.”

“Oh, right... She doesn’t have any weapon skills.”

It was reassuring to see that Tamaki had come up with a wise strategy. I couldn’t help but pat her head in appreciation.

“Either way, you’ll face the strongest enemy in the end. I’m counting on you,” I said.

“I’ll do my best!” she replied with a sheepish smile. It wasn’t the most confident grin, but I knew I could count on her—she had grown into one of the most reliable members of our team.

“So, Kazu, which card will you play?” Tamaki asked me.

“If we want to guarantee a takedown, we should use Familiar Awakening,” I began. “One of us keeps one Mekish Grau at bay by using it on Sha-Lau, and the rest of us focus on the other enemy. With Tamaki and Arisu leading the front line and Mia and Rushia pushing forward, this beast won’t stand a chance for long. Once we’ve taken out the first, we can deal with the second the same way.

“That’s probably our strongest strategy,” I continued. “Using Rushia’s Magic Release will be a lot for her, which might limit our tactical options down the line.”

It didn’t take much thought to know whether my or Rushia’s MP would provide more strategic flexibility in the long run.

“Rushia, can you fire your Magic Release at its maximum?” I asked.

“Yep, no problem,” she replied with determination in her eyes.

“Kazu-san, are you sure?” Arisu asked with a hint of concern.

“By bombing from a distance, we can ensure consistent damage. One shot might not be enough, so I’m counting on a second one from you. It might use up all your MP, though...”

“It’s the fastest way to neutralize a Mekish Grau, right?” Rushia affirmed.

Indeed, the Mekish Grau were known for their long-range and area-of-effect attacks. By rushing headlong into its territory, we would risk being dragged into a prolonged battle. It made more sense to weaken it from afar, only forcing it into close combat when we held the advantage.

In our last encounter, we’d been cautious because we hadn’t known what to expect. This time, we were stronger, and we would turn the tables by taking

advantage of their weaknesses.

“Fortunately, the two Mekish Grau are busy mopping up the remaining soldiers. We’ll stay low and sneak closer so Rushia’s attack spells will be in range,” I explained.

Everyone nodded in agreement, their faces set in grim resolve.

Chapter 141: The Two Divine-Class Beasts – Part 1

After parting ways with Shiki and her group, the five of us continued flying, the temple visible at two o'clock. We were flying low, hills obscuring our view of what lay ahead. Below us stretched a wasteland darkened by gathering storm clouds.

Suddenly, the sky beyond the hills flashed a bright red.

Moments later, a series of explosions echoed from our left. We instinctively flattened our bodies in the air, bracing ourselves for the gust of wind that came after a few seconds.

"And now we know exactly where that pair of Mekish Grau is," I remarked.

"Mm-hm. That was definitely their Fire Beam," Tamaki replied.

"Did you say Fire Beam?" I asked. "Isn't that what they call those fiery arrows they shoot from their bows? Wicked Flame Shot?"

The Mekish Grau were wreaking havoc just beyond those hills. Were the soldiers still putting up a desperate fight? Or had they already been routed and the monsters were just cleaning up?

Either way, with the monsters distracted, this was our chance.

"We have to help the soldiers..." Arisu muttered.

I put a hand on her shoulder and shook my head. "Arisu, your main focus should be protecting us."

"But..."

"I know you have a good heart; everyone does. But we have to prioritize. I won't budge on this. I'm the only one who decides whose life to save or give up. Understand?"

Arisu and Tamaki looked at me worriedly, but as the leader, I couldn't let them shoulder even a fraction of that burden. I wouldn't let them waste their

compassion on allies we didn't know.

I looked at this girl I loved. Arisu started to object, saying, "But..." before quickly silencing herself. She nodded, her face tense.

I pulled away from Arisu with a smile, and Rushia approached in her place.

"You two look like you can read each other's minds," she remarked.

I chuckled. "Well, we've been deeply in love from the beginning."

"By that logic, wouldn't all great commanders and their soldiers be romantically involved?" she teased.

Without wanting to, I imagined two brawny men embracing each other...

I apologize, my mind wandered to the wrong place.

"Hmm, sounds pretty homoerotic," I commented.

"You always say such random stuff!" Rushia replied with a playful twinkle in her eyes.

"Since day one, Arisu and I have fought side by side. We've killed quite a few monsters together."

"Yeah." Rushia nodded. "I'm sure every day you spent together was so intense."

"We spent almost a whole day with you too, Rushia," I pointed out.

"Yeah, and the more time I spend with the four of you, the more I feel how close you all are."

That's true, I thought. So much has happened—especially during those first two days. I wonder what Rushia thinks about us. Maybe I should think about that. But I shook my head, deciding to leave it for later.

"I see them!" shouted Mia, who had cast Greater Invisibility on herself and was flying slightly above us. "Straight ahead, a few miles past that hill. It looks chaotic. There are soldiers running away, and the Meki-tan are chasing them and trampling everything."

Don't call them that...

It was more or less what we'd expected. It was disheartening to think an entire army could be decimated by just two monsters. But Mekish Grau was probably designed as an anti-army weapon. It had been foolish to just send regular soldiers against them.

The real problem, of course, was that regular soldiers were all the allied forces could spare. If we hadn't shown up, they would have had no choice but to let their troops get slaughtered. Maybe they considered that an acceptable loss? After all, their main focus was the invasion team heading into the temple, which massive monsters like the Mekish Grau couldn't get inside. So once the main battle moved in there, they'd fare better. These soldiers were just a distraction to hold them off until then.

It's a sad reality for the soldiers, but if today's operation fails, the entire continent will be doomed. We'll all die.

"Rushia," I called as she flew beside me. "If it gets too dangerous, we'll abort the plan and focus all our strength on taking them down."

"Got it."

Once we crossed the hill, the battle would begin. From that point on, speed would be the key to our victory.

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Based on our previous encounters, it seemed that the Mekish Grau mainly used sight and Ultravision to sense their surroundings. As far as we knew, they couldn't see through smoke or fog. Although we hadn't tested Greater Invisibility on them, I doubted such an easy trick would work on god-tier monsters. However, according to our trusted familiar, the Phantom Wolf King Sha-Lau, Ultravision had a limited range—probably about thirty meters, maybe twice that for more formidable monsters. Fire Magic had a longer range, which meant we could attack from where they couldn't see us.

So, our plan was to get within a hundred meters of them under the cover of Greater Invisibility and unleash our magic at maximum power. Our spell of choice? Flame Cutter, designed primarily for focused, single-target damage.

This Rank 8 spell conjured a blade enveloped in flames. A blade of pure mana that melted and severed anything in its path. Unlike other spells, however, this one required the caster to aim and then release, a lot like firing a crossbow.

Fortunately, Rushia was adept with a bow. A test in the White Room had shown her precision; she could hit a target as small as a toothpick from across the room. But by her own account, she could almost never miss from a hundred meters—hence our choice of distance.

As we approached the top of a hill, we paused for a moment. First, I cast Deflection on Rushia. Then she amplified her Fire Resistance to cover our whole party—just as a precaution. I then cast Deflection on Mia, who used an enhanced version of Greater Invisibility on everyone at once. My own See Invisibility confirmed the spell had worked.

“Let’s go,” Rushia declared a second after becoming invisible, and she took off at full speed.

“We should follow her,” I suggested, grabbing Tamaki and Arisu’s hands while Mia clung to my back and wrapped her arms around my neck.

The four of us followed closely behind Rushia while the two monstrous centaur-like creatures continued rampaging in the distance.

Their ridiculous size made them look much closer than they were. I couldn’t stop thinking that this was the same god-tier monster we’d fiercely battled the day before—but now there were two of them.

One Mekish Grau drew its bow and aimed at a group of about a hundred fleeing soldiers, between about 10 o’clock and 8 o’clock from our perspective. Then he released, launching a massive flaming arrow at the group.

The shock wave hit a moment after the explosion. Rushia skillfully maintained her balance and rode through it effortlessly, but the rest of us were thrown slightly off course. Mia tightened her grip around my neck, pointing which way we should go.

When we followed her directions, flying suddenly became noticeably easier.

“It’s like there are pockets in the air currents,” she explained.

“You can see them?” I asked, impressed.

“Of course not. It’s all about experience,” she replied smugly.

“We’ve all had about the same amount of flying time, haven’t we?” I pointed out.

“In video games!” Mia retorted. I could almost see the triumphant grin on her face behind me. But to be honest, I was grateful for her guidance.

We were going around sixty kilometers an hour—nothing special for a road trip, but when you’re flying through the sky with only your body, the scenery passes by at an incredible speed. Assuming the Mekish Grau were about five kilometers from the hill, it would take us five more minutes to reach them. We had eight minutes of Greater Invisibility left, so we would get there with time to spare.

As we got closer, the true extent of the devastation became clear. Craters scarred the landscape, and everywhere we looked lay the remains of soldiers. The few still alive were badly wounded. A handful of archers and mages launched arrows and offensive spells, but they were quickly overwhelmed by the retaliatory fire arrows and charging attacks of the Mekish Grau. It was a nightmarish scene of chaos and despair.

“This is bad,” I muttered. “If we use magic recklessly, we might end up hurting our allies...”

“Mm. Should we stop Rushia?” Mia asked.

After a moment of consideration, I shook my head. “No. These are the sacrifices we need to make.”

“I guess so,” she agreed.

If we hesitated now, it would lead to even more casualties. We didn’t have the luxury of time. And Rushia probably understood this as well as any of us.

Finally, we reached the hundred-meter mark, and Rushia halted, gathering her energy in preparation for the mana release.

Fortunately, one of the Mekish Grau also stopped moving at that moment.

Perfect, I thought. But just then, the monstrous creature turned its gaze toward us.

Damn, has it noticed us?

“Can it possibly... detect mana?” Mia murmured a guess.

Hey, you should have mentioned that before! But there was no point arguing now.

“Rushia, run!” I shouted at the top of my lungs as I tried to close the distance between us. But Rushia stood motionless, her eyes fixed on the Mekish Grau. Winds of mana swirled around her, signaling the imminent release of magic. This stubborn girl—she was going to finish this, even if it meant mutual destruction.

I had forgotten; she was the princess of a nation that had been destroyed by monsters.

The Mekish Grau aimed its bow at us and released an infernal arrow straight toward Rushia. Almost simultaneously, Rushia unleashed her massive reservoir of mana.

“Flame Cutter!” she intoned.

A gigantic blade of flame shot forward, colliding head-on with the monster’s fiery arrow. The resulting explosion was deafening.



Chapter 142: The Two Divine-Class Beasts – Part 2

When the powerful shockwave hit, Rushia, who was closest to the epicenter, was blown away like a leaf in the wind, spinning wildly through the air. But with remarkable agility, she managed to right herself mid-flight. A moment later, the aftershock of the fiery arrow reached the rest of us.

Anticipating the impact, I had already landed on the ground. But the blast was still so overwhelming that I struggled to stay upright.

“Mia, cast Gravity on us,” I commanded.

“Okay,” she replied, readying the spell. “Gravity!”

A high-gravity field enveloped us, and the weight of Mia on my back suddenly doubled. I let out a strained groan; it felt like she was crushing me.

“Damn, my bones... they really hurt,” I winced.

I could hear Mia muttering an apologetic “Oops,” but whether she’d actively dispelled it or not, the Gravity spell had already worn off, and the shockwave had passed.

We looked up to see that the dust cleared, revealing the two Mekish Graus. One of them was badly injured. Rushia’s magic must have been far more powerful than the fiery arrow. It seemed to have taken the brunt of the damage to its horse-like abdomen, and it was kneeling on its front legs and moaning in pain. Its upper body, however, was unscathed. It began to draw an arrow from its bow...

Before it had a chance to release, Rushia unleashed her second spell from where she still flew above us. She hadn’t expected to finish it off with the first spell alone—she’d been planning this second strike all along.

“Flame Cutter!” she shouted.

Once again, a massive blade of flame was unleashed, slicing through the injured Mekish Grau’s neck cleanly in one fell swoop before continuing its

trajectory far into the distance. Far, far away, beyond the horizon, a loud *boom* resounded, followed by a mushroom cloud.

At the same time, I heard the familiar sound of leveling up.

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We were back in the White Room. This time, everyone except Arisu had leveled up. Since both Mekish Graus were over Level 40, this was no surprise. But the person who had almost single-handedly defeated the Mekish Grau...

Rushia collapsed to the ground, drenched in sweat as if she'd been under a waterfall. She was panting, her chest heaving up and down quickly. Magic release wasn't easy on the user's body, even less so when using it twice in a row. Even though I was the one who had given the order... Well, I hadn't exactly expected a mutual takedown!

Arisu and the others seemed dazed. *Ah, I see, the Greater Invisibility hasn't worn off yet...*

"Arisu, come here for a sec," I instructed.

"Kazu-san?"

I guided Arisu's hand to the fallen Rushia and had her cast Dispel, a Rank 3 Healing spell that cancels ongoing magical effects. Normally, you'd have to specify the target, but since we couldn't see Rushia due to her invisibility, I had Arisu touch her directly.

Rushia reappeared before our eyes, still in visible distress.

"Rushia-san!" Arisu exclaimed, then began frantically casting a variety of spells on the girl. Soon, Rushia's face showed relief, but she still didn't seem to be in any condition to talk.

Rushia coughed violently. I tried to offer her water from a bottle, but after taking a sip she spat it out.

Mia chimed in, "I think it's time for mouth-to-mouth."

I looked over to her and noted that the Greater Invisibility had worn off. “You never miss a chance, do you?”

“If I were you, I’d say the same thing,” she replied, oddly proud of herself.

Before I could respond, Arisu began hesitantly, “Um, Kazu-san, can you do something?”

“Sure, Arisu. What?”

“Could you turn around while we make Rushia more comfortable?”

A little embarrassed, I complied. The rustling of clothes fired my imagination.

“Impressive...” Mia whispered in typical Mia fashion. “Quite a pair she’s got there.”

Annoyed by her unnecessary comment, I pulled Mia toward me and made her sit on my lap. “Stay there,” I told her.

“Oh! VIP seat! Gives me the right to tease you, Kazucchi,” she grinned.

Without thinking, I grabbed her cheeks and playfully squeezed them. “That’s what you do to the People of Light on a regular basis. Remember not to take advantage of Leen-san’s kindness,” I teased.

After a bit of fun, I let her go. Mia looked up at me with tears in the corners of her eyes. “This could be Rushia’s own kind of game.”

I groaned. “Damn, she’s a real masochist.”

“Hey, Kazu-san! Can you keep it down?” Tamaki called from where she and Arisu were still taking care of Rushia.

Feeling guilty, I fell silent.

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After about an hour, Rushia seemed to be feeling a lot better. As she straightened her clothes and turned to us, her slightly flushed face looked seductive. Just as I had that thought, Mia looked up at me from where she was still nestled between my legs.

How long is she going to stay there? I wondered.

“Rushia has this subtly sensual way about her, doesn’t she?” Mia commented.

“You really don’t have to point that out.” I gave Mia a light pat on the head.

We looked up to see Arisu and Tamaki staring at us. Rushia chuckled softly. It was a laugh that felt like it came from the depths of her heart, perhaps because she couldn’t muster the energy for any pretense. Normally, even around us, her expression hardly changed.

That probably meant that she hadn’t fully opened up to us yet. The realization made me feel a bit lonely. *But that aside...*

I picked Mia up and tossed her gently to the side. Still seated on the floor, I scooted forward to approach Rushia, who was sitting gracefully. As I approached her, she looked slightly startled and leaned back, inadvertently emphasizing her chest.

No, that’s not the point. The sweet scent emanating from her sweaty body... No, that’s not the point either.

“Rushia,” I began, “I wanted to ask you something. Why did you decide to take it down so aggressively?”

“I thought it was the best thing to do,” she replied. “If I hadn’t taken it out with my second shot, we probably would’ve been in for a long fight.”

So Rushia had acted decisively—and I truly believed she made the right decision. Cutting through the monster’s flesh and breaking the bone was a brave move.

But...

“I didn’t order you to do that,” I told her. “I said to change the plan if it seemed too dangerous.”

“I believed it could be done,” she replied, her tone steady. “The risk of failure was small.”

Did she misunderstand my instructions?

No, it's not that. Rushia was sharp. She had deliberately interpreted my orders her own way, driven by a desire to see her goal through no matter what.

It suddenly dawned on me. This girl, although so reserved in expressing her feelings, was incredibly stubborn.

I moved closer to Rushia until our knees almost touched and looked deep into her ruby eyes. "My orders were clear: 'Change the plan if it puts you at risk.' I can't believe you misunderstood."

She hesitated. "I..."

"You know you can trust me, right?"

Her clear eyes flickered for a moment. It was a sign of inner turmoil, unusual for someone who was so good at hiding her emotions. I felt a twinge of happiness when I saw her composure falter.

It showed that she cared about us. That she considered us friends, if only a little. But I had to correct her misunderstanding. Just as my past concealment and hesitation had once endangered Arisu, Rushia's recklessness could endanger us all.

Behavior like that comes from deep-rooted feelings. For me, it had been my pride in Arisu and my anger at Shiki.

For Rushia, it was probably...

"You really despise monsters, don't you?" I asked quietly. "Enough to risk everything to bring them down?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation.

Wait up, I thought reflexively.

Rushia averted her gaze. "I apologize. Apparently, I underestimated how strongly I felt," she admitted.

"What do you mean?"

"To be consumed by that kind of hatred, to the point of losing myself... It's shameful. Whatever punishment you think..."

Now I followed. She was profoundly intelligent, and she felt deep shame for letting her emotions take over. Maybe this was why she had tried to brush off her recklessness at first. Having been raised as a leader, acknowledging such irrational behavior must have been more shameful to her than I could imagine.

Still, she realized her mistake and was remorseful.

So, what should I do now?

“Hmm. As punishment, Rushia should undress in front of Kazu,” said Mia.

“Tamaki, Arisu—discipline Mia for me.”

“On it!”

“Leave it to us, Kazu!”

Arisu quickly restrained the overly outspoken Mia. “Come on, Tamaki-chan!” Arisu called as Tamaki approached from the front and tickled Mia’s armpits. Mia laughed until tears streamed down her face. I decided to leave them alone, turning back to the issue at hand...

I faced Rushia again. The elven girl placed a hand on her chest and looked up at me with worried eyes. “If my body can serve as a form of punishment...” she offered.

“I’m really not interested in that. But...”

I reached out and wrapped my arms around Rushia’s neck, pulling her into a brief embrace. I could feel her breath catch in surprise.

The embrace lasted only a moment; I let her go before my desires could overtake me.

Oh, that was close. I mean, Rushia had this sweet smell about her, and her breasts were... more than I expected.

No, no, that’s not the point.

“Um...”

“You’re part of our team, Rushia. You’re one of us,” I told her as she blushed. It felt a little awkward, but I had to tell her with words. Again and again, until she really understood. “So, Rushia, even if you mess up or make mistakes, don’t

hide them from us. Whatever points we lose, we'll all make up together. It's okay if we lose now or even run away. All that matters is that we win in the end."

Rushia took a deep breath and stared into my eyes. Then... her face looked like she was about to cry.

"Yes," she said, nodding in true understanding.

Chapter 143: The Two Divine-Class Beasts – Part 3

When I looked at Rushia's pale pink lips, a dangerous feeling began to swell in me, so I quickly averted my gaze.

I walked over to stop Tamaki from tickling Mia, who was laying on the floor, panting heavily in exhaustion.

"Um... this is... in its own way..."

"You're something else."

"Kazu-san, she looks really tired."

I patted both Tamaki and Arisu on the head. "Good job, good job," I told them.

Once everyone had calmed down, we sat in a circle again, and Rushia's stomach made a cute rumbling sound.

"Shall we have a quick snack before we talk more?"

"Yes!"

Rushia's energetic nod was truly heartwarming. Back to her usual cool demeanor, she demanded cake like it was her right. Not to be outdone by the princess's insatiable appetite, Arisu and the others joined in. Well, that was okay. Whatever they ate here would be gone by the time we got back to the battlefield, anyway.

After their bellies were full... they all started to yawn, obviously ready for a nap. What could I do?

"Let's have a nap first and discuss everything later."

I used the Summon Cloth skill to produce a pile of blankets and comforters, and everyone lay down on the soft surfaces. For some reason, everyone, including Rushia, gathered around me.

“Sleeping in a circle with friends, comrades, or family is something I’ve always admired,” she said.

From what I’d seen, the large families of the People of Light slept this way in their hollowed-out tree houses. *Maybe it’s because their houses are round inside? Different places have different customs, I suppose.* And it seemed that Rushia had never experienced the bond of family.

She’d been crafted and raised as a weapon by her own parents, and she’d never had many comrades or friends. After her homeland was destroyed, she’d sought refuge in the World Tree, where she’d met Leen, the only person she could call a close friend. Even so, Leen was the head of a clan, so casual sleepovers were out of the question.

“Why not try it?” I suggested.

We arranged ourselves in Light Tribe style, our heads meeting in the center and our bodies radiating outward like spokes on a wheel. The gentle rhythm of each other’s breathing reached our ears, and a sweet scent wafted around us.

“It’s a bit exciting, hard to stay calm,” Rushia said from the opposite side, her voice teasing.

“Yeah, my heart is racing too,” I admitted.

Oddly, Arisu, Tamaki, and even Mia—usually the last to fall asleep—were already filling the air with their soft snores. That was probably my fault... or maybe she was just that exhausted. Thinking back, neither Mia nor Rushia had taken a nap during our earlier break. Maybe I should’ve insisted that they rest. I should keep that in mind next time.

“Can I... call you Kazu, without any honorifics?” Rushia asked.

“Hmm? Oh, sure, I don’t mind. I’ve been calling you by your first name anyway.”

“Thank you.” She was clearly happy, but her tone soon turned serious. “Kazu, there are two things I want to ask you.”

“Sure, what’s that?”

“How did you not just try to get revenge right away?”

Ah, so she'd heard about my past. The truth was that my heart had been on the verge of tearing apart from what I'd been through. I wavered countless times and almost made some serious mistakes. *But in the end, what guided me...*

I looked left and right, taking in Arisu, Tamaki and Mia.

"It's because of my friends," I finally said. "They showed me their confidence, both by what they said and did. I may be a normal guy, but with their support, I was able to find strength beyond my abilities."

"I see," Rushia sighed.

She shuffled, and then her face was inches from mine. Those azure eyes locked onto mine, and for a moment, the world seemed to fade away.

"I don't think you're normal, Kazu. I don't know what you're like in everyday life, but in times of crisis, you show leadership like no one I've ever seen."

"I don't know about that... but I won't deny that the past few days have given me a lot of... practice," I admitted.

She nodded gently. "Do you think I could ever be like you?"

I pressed my forehead lightly against hers, letting our shared warmth bridge the gap between us. "You're not alone, Rushia. Not anymore."

She whispered back, "I know."

"When you're ready to talk, when you feel overwhelmed, just let it out."

"I promise I will. Maybe not now, but when our fight here is over," Rushia said, her gaze unwavering.

I nodded, and then she reached out and cupped my face with both hands. She leaned in, and a soft kiss graced my forehead. It wasn't a lover's kiss, but one of deep affection and gratitude. Still, it made my heart race, and I suddenly found it strangely hard to breathe.





It felt like I had just closed my eyes, but when I woke up, I realized that quite some time had passed. The soft rumbling of Rushia's stomach reached my ears.

"I'm sorry," came her whispered voice.

I looked up to find her sitting next to me, knees drawn up, her face a light shade of pink. She was dangerously close to giving me a peek under her skirt. I quickly looked away and stood up, feeling a little wobbly, but Rushia's hand on my shoulder steadied me. As we stood close together, I caught a whiff of her.

"Are you okay?" she asked, concerned.

"Yeah, I think I just overslept," I replied, rubbing the back of my neck. I couldn't believe I was hungry again, considering how much I'd eaten right before bed. But when I checked my watch, I saw it had been nearly twelve hours.

"Wow, this is luxury," I laughed. "Only in the White Room can we afford to lose track of time like this."

"You don't even feel the need to go to the bathroom here unless you really want to," Tamaki commented nonchalantly.

"It really is a strange place," I agreed.

After a light meal to keep us from getting too sleepy, we began our meeting. The main agenda items were our plans for the immediate future and leveling up.

"I'll use my six skill points for Rank 6 Support Magic. Tamaki, you'll upgrade your Strength to Rank 4, and Mia and Rushia will upgrade their Wind and Fire Magic to Rank 9." We'd discussed this before, but I wanted to confirm it with everyone.

They all nodded in agreement.

"As soon as we get back there, Rushia, you'll get healed by Arisu and then retreat to the back. Got it?"

“Understood. I probably won’t be able to fight anymore, though. Even if I were just there with you, I’d probably be in the way.”

Rushia had unleashed her maximum magical power twice in a row. It had been an incredible attack, but it had taken a massive toll on her, and she’d be off the table for a while as a combat asset.

Even with the care she’d gotten earlier, it might take her until the evening to fully recover. Perhaps she could push herself a little further, but that remained to be seen.

I’d rather she hadn’t overexerted herself, but if every one of us collapsed, that would be it for us...

Now, Leen, currently Level 9, wouldn’t hesitate to use Rushia, our most powerful fire mage. But Leen was a strategist. Even if the other person was her dearest friend, she’d be willing to put her feelings aside to gain an advantage.

It was because of her character that I was sure Shiki trusted Leen and took the front line.

“That’s okay, Rushia-san,” I said. “Just rest up before our next battle.”

She seemed fine in the White Room, of course, but that was only because almost a day had passed in here. As soon as we got back out there, she’d be right back to her battered state.

“Arisu-san, can you take care of Rushia-san once we return? Hide her somewhere on the other side of the hill, and then come back right away.”

“Y-Yes!”

“Tamaki-san and Mia-san, you two attack the remaining Mekish Grau. Mia-san, have Tamaki-san help you close the gap. Hold out until Arisu-san gets back.”

“Hmm. Or we could just defeat it ourselves...”

“That’s fine too.”

Mia pouted, her line taken. “Lately, Kazu-kun has been nothing but mean.”

“You really need to think about your own actions, Mia-san!”

“I know, but I can’t help it.”

The rumors about Mia lying about her age just wouldn’t stop.

“Shiki-san mentioned it earlier, but let’s not rush just because we have another opportunity. Our priority is to safely eliminate the god-level troops,” I said.

With me and Mia taking the lead, we went over our plans carefully. There was a lot of speculation about what would happen next. I almost wondered if we should buy a notebook to jot down the details of our strategy, but checking notes during battle could prove fatal. We would be better off relying on our memory.

“Well, let’s get started,” I said, and when everyone nodded, I hit the enter key, and we left the White Room.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 33	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5→6
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 6→0

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 28	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 3→4	SKILL POINTS: 5→1

MIA	
LEVEL: 28	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC:	SKILL POINTS:

8→9	10→1
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RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 23	FIRE MAGIC: 8→9
SKILL POINTS: 10→1	

Chapter 144: The Two Divine-Class Beasts – Part 4

We found ourselves back on the smoky battlefield—the wilderness to the west of the Storm Temple, where sandstorms and infernos raged.

Rushia, who wasn't looking too good, hovered about ten meters above the ground. She was still under the effect of Greater Invisibility and too far away for Arisu to reach her.

I motioned for us all to grab hands, then flew over to Rushia so Mia could touch her shoulder.

"Dispel her Greater Invisibility," I instructed.

"Got it."

Persistent spells like Silence or Invisibility, with a few exceptions, could be voluntarily dispelled by the caster when they touched the target.

As soon as Rushia's Greater Invisibility was dispelled, Arisu held her in midair and cast a healing spell. Mia then began dispelling the Greater Invisibility on each of us. Soon, we could all see each other again.

"All right, Kazu-kun, let's go."

"We'll be back, Kazu-san!"

"Yeah, both of you, be careful."

Mia took Tamaki's hand. "Dimension Step."

In the blink of an eye, they jumped a distance of one hundred meters, appearing near the unharmed Mekish Grau. With a sword in each hand, Tamaki lunged at the god-tier creature from above. But the Mekish Grau was unfazed by the sudden attack, blocking with a casual swing of its massive sword. Blade met blade, creating a fierce shower of sparks.

They're pretty well matched in strength, I thought.

No, the Mekish Grau took a small step back. Amazingly, Tamaki's power had surpassed that of the six-meter-tall monster.

What set her apart this time wasn't just her Swordsmanship but also her Strength, which had increased from Rank 1 to 4. Now she was more than a match for this monster bigger than a giant.

The Mekish Grau tossed aside its bow and summoned a sword in each of its four hands, then immediately launched an attack on Tamaki.

Anyone could see she was at a slight disadvantage. *However...*

Mia intervened with her magic just in time. I couldn't tell if she had cast something to stop the creature's movements or temporarily blinded it, but she tipped the scales of battle in their favor.

That meant I could start thinking about our next steps.

Leaving Rushia in Arisu's care, I took out a shell-like object from my pocket.

It was a kind of magical communication device—far superior to a radio, but it only worked in places with a high concentration of mana, like the Storm Temple or the World Tree.

Surprisingly, even at the World Tree, it didn't seem like it was used very much. The Light People seemed to be behind when it came to this particular technology, and only a few human nations used the devices. Thankfully, Shiki had given us a few before we parted ways.

The device was simple to use: hold the shell and chant a certain keyword, and your voice would be transmitted to whoever possessed the counterpart shell.

Wow, that was sudden.

I soon found out that an elite squad had launched an attack on the Storm Temple when the two Mekish Grau had wandered away from its sentry post.

From their point of view, they probably couldn't count on us, an unpredictable force. Maybe they were just hoping we'd serve to distract the two divine-class soldiers.

If that was the case, so be it. They'd clear the way for us inside the temple.

“Stay safe. Love you,” Shiki said, but there was no real warmth in her words.

“Yeah, yeah,” I replied and ended the communication.

By then, the outcome of our own battle had become quite clear: Tamaki’s blade had shredded the Mekish Grau.

Just yesterday, these divine-class soldiers had seemed so formidable. But against the combination of Tamaki and Mia, they’d crumbled without managing to inflict so much as a scratch on the girls.

So much new power, just since yesterday. If there’s a tomorrow... I wonder how much more we’ll have grown by then.

“Kazu-san, Rushia-san’s awake!” Arisu reported, bringing me back to the moment. The elven girl looked in my direction and offered a faint smile. Her chest, likely unbuttoned for easier breathing, was... prominently visible.

“Kazu-san, what exactly are you looking at?” Arisu scowled at me, narrowing her eyes.

I quickly apologized. *I really shouldn’t have gotten distracted during battle, but... well, that’s how much I trust our two vanguard members.*

Soon enough, the Mekish Grau collapsed.

Back to the White Room.

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This time, Arisu was the one who’d leveled up, and she now had 7 Skill Points. However, she decided to save them to improve her Spearmanship in the future, and I gave her the green light.

After another moment of discussion, we left the room.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 29	SPEARMANSHIP: 8
HEALING MAGIC:	SKILL POINTS:



Back on the battlefield, we picked up the two yellow gems dropped by our fearsome enemies. Each was worth a hundred tokens, so we'd have to use them wisely.

Dozens of soldiers, who had been fleeing in terror moments before, now watched us from a distance, murmuring in confusion and shock.

Maybe they couldn't believe they had survived—or perhaps they were struggling to believe what we'd just done.

I thought Leen-san and the others had told them about our abilities...

Or maybe they simply hadn't been expecting reinforcements.

In any case, we didn't have time to deal with the soldiers just then. We also couldn't afford to waste any of Arisu's MP on the many wounded soldiers, even though some of the injuries looked bad enough to be fatal if untreated.

At that moment, I was hoping the soldiers would continue to keep their distance, especially as we needed to focus on Rushia. I approached her as Arisu continued to tend to her.

"Go on without me," Rushia whispered, trying to sit up.

What should we do? After a moment's hesitation, I decided to do as she said.

I contacted Shiki again through the communication shell, and then we entrusted Rushia to some soldiers who were still in good condition.

The four of us—Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and I—took flight, heading straight for the Storm Temple. By this point, it should already have been infiltrated by elite troops from various nations.

"How strong do you think these elite troops are?" Tamaki wondered aloud.

"Well, they had a little skirmish yesterday, a practice match. But Sakura totally dominated," Mia replied.

So even the elites were on that level. It was strange to think of humans with weapon ranks of 6 or 7, and even stranger to think of monsters that boasted powers beyond that. High-level monsters might have been rare, but if there were any of that caliber in the temple... all I could hope was that our elite troops hadn't been destroyed. They would prove invaluable in the aftermath of this battle if they were still around.

Looking up at the temple where it soared high into the overcast sky, we could still see the constant lightning strikes around it. It was... terrifying. Nonetheless, we had no choice but to trust Leen that our talismans would keep us safe. After all, the advance party had managed to get past the lightning and successfully infiltrated the temple.

How did the monsters do it? I wondered. Did they have some kind of resistance to the lightning, or did they find a way around it?

While intense battles raged below the temple's hill, the entrance area itself seemed eerily quiet. The ground, blackened and smoking from the lightning, gave off an oppressive aura.

"Should we cast some resistance spells?" Mia asked.

Hmm, lightning is usually Wind Magic so if we had High Resist Wind... It would be a big chunk of MP, but maybe it's worth it for peace of mind.

"Yeah, please do. Cast Deflection," I said.

"High Resist Wind," Mia chanted, and we were all enveloped in a faint green glow.

Good, that should keep us safe.

We cautiously approached the Storm Temple, and after a few minutes, we finally reached the scorched ground at the top of the hill. I couldn't help tensing up in anticipation, and Arisu and the others looked back anxiously. I grabbed Arisu and Tamaki's hands, and the three of us flew together. Mia, apparently not wanting to be left out, grunted and grabbed onto me from behind.

The lightning continued to strike the ground all around us but avoided us completely—even with Tamaki and Arisu's metal weapons. That had to be the work of the talismans.

Soon we were hovering in front of the high walls that encircled the temple. What had once been a grand entrance was now in ruins. The once majestic archway had crumbled, and the concrete gates were now nothing but rubble. The entrance seemed completely unguarded.

Rumor had it that part of the infiltration team was waiting in this area. We looked around for a cautious minute before finally landing behind the walls, where the ground wasn't charred. My theory about the talismans was confirmed when I looked back to see a bolt of lightning strike the ground directly below where we'd just flown.

While we contemplated what to do next, a sound came from ahead, making all four of us startle and turn toward the interior of the temple.

"Excuse me, are you from the Hero Squad?"

A small group of soldiers was stepping cautiously out of the shadows. There were four of them, all women, and they must have been at least in their late twenties. At first glance, they appeared to be normal human soldiers, but their attire quickly set them apart.

Their metal armor was conspicuously battered. From the depths of their helmets, four pairs of eyes watched us with intense sharpness. Their posture was calm and collected. And despite their heavy armor, they moved without a sound.

Ah, so these are the ones...

These women were more than just veterans; they were the elite of the elite—the very definition of the word *elite*—from all of the allied nations.

"I'm not sure how I feel about being called a 'hero,' but yes, um..."

We exchanged greetings.

The group's leader introduced herself as Laskaharli-something... I forget the rest. Anyway, she said it was okay to just call her Laska. Her long name probably came from her noble lineage or some traditional background. I also couldn't remember the name of her nation, but when I tried to pronounce it, she laughed heartily and said, "It's just the name of a fallen nation. It doesn't matter if you don't remember it."

Her self-deprecating joke was made more intense by the fact that the other women were laughing too. I got the impression that their nations had all fallen as well.

When I asked why their group was all women, Laska explained that among the elite troops, the men who had gone to the front lines had asked the women to stay behind. This was so that there would be as many as possible to bear children after the battle. I could understand the men's feelings, but I could also understand the frustration these women felt. To be told not to fight when they'd come so far must have been infuriating. Looking at Rushia, I was reminded of the deep-seated hatred the survivors of this world had for the monsters.

"Sir Hero... or should I say Sir Kazu? May we accompany you?" Laska asked.

"Of course, please do. You know the inside of the temple, right?"

"Absolutely!" Laska exclaimed with confidence, and the faces of the other three erupted with joy. "We've memorized the map."

That was reassuring. Even though I had a map on a tablet in my bag, there wouldn't be time to consult it in the heat of battle. In their overwhelming happiness, a couple of the women even hugged me tightly around the neck.

Wow, they smell like battle.

To avoid dying by strangulation at the hands of these muscular warrior women, I held my breath and waited for them to release their grip.

Chapter 145: The Storm Temple of Gal Yass – Part 1

After the crushing hug, Laska and her team guided us through the innards of the temple. Following Shiki's advice, we gave them some sweets. First, one of Laska's companions took a bite, and her eyes widened in surprise. A sugary smell filled the air, and after looking at her comrade's face, Laska took a bite herself.

"So, heroes eat seriously delicious treats, don't they?"

"Well, occasionally."

"This is great."

It was said that the Storm Temple of Gal Yass had been a holy place for a theocratic nation before the monsters overran it. But this was not a nation that worshiped a specific deity. This world was basically polytheistic, and moreover, the existence of these gods was a confirmed fact. Through divine oracles, the people had direct, albeit limited, contact with the gods, and there was an alliance of loosely connected faiths that understood and respected each other's beliefs.

There had always been sects that refused to join this alliance and others that fought one another or didn't get along, but for a while that was all. The alliance had been formed to convey the intentions of the gods to the various nations, and it served its purpose well. However, the system had grown tired over time. There were more and more irreconcilable differences and contradictions among the beliefs that affected the operation of the temple.

Corruption, ties to the underworld, and eventually illegal intervention in other nations... The Storm Temple began to rely more and more on its divine oracles as a shield of authority.

Of course, there were self-cleansing mechanisms. There were those who sought to eradicate this darkness, and the momentum for reform grew. However, tragedy struck when the temple, already rife with internal strife, was

invaded by monsters. This sacred place, once a formidable defense, had fallen all too easily. Everyone, from the complacent old priests to the young, eager scholars, had been ruthlessly slaughtered. Only the Shinto priest's family and their close associates had managed to escape.

The dramas of human society continued to play out around the shrine maiden, but fortunately, this bloodline lived on. After the untimely death of the previous Shinto priest due to overuse of the divine oracles, a young man—his son—had taken over and now oversaw the divine rituals from a fortified location.

So, using the divine oracles takes a toll on one's life? Given the terrible state of this world, they must be desperate, not sparing much thought for the future. The Shinto priest must have a heavy load to bear, too.

Frankly, I would have liked to contact the gods and question them for a full hour about how we'd gotten into this predicament. But there didn't seem to be time for that.

Laska and her team had been responsible for guarding the priest until they'd volunteered for this mission. The previous generation, who had prayed for the temple's restoration under the new priest, had given Laska's soldiers invaluable documents about the temple. Not only were they skilled fighters, they also had the full layout of the temple, including every secret passage, etched in their memories.

Despite these women's skills, the assault team had relegated them to mere gatekeeper duties when we all returned, simply because they were women. They'd probably seen an opportunity when I arrived on the scene with four girls in my own party.

With Laska leading the way, we walked through a stone corridor about five meters high and seven or eight meters wide. The walls of the corridor were lit with an orange glow that might have been magical. I was grateful for the light, knowing it would make it impossible for monsters to hide.

The corridor was also lined with statues, each three or four meters tall. An old man in a robe with a beard, a dignified swordswoman, and a sharp-looking man aiming a bow...

When I asked Laska about them, she answered, “They represent the apostles of the gods.”

She went on to explain that this area was known as the Corridor of Atonement. Outsiders would walk the long path to cleanse themselves of worldly sins before entering the temple. Those inside, I guessed, would continue to accumulate their sins.

Fascinated by her story, I wanted to learn more, but...

Something seems off about this place.

“It’s surprisingly intact, considering the monster attack,” Arisu remarked.

Right, that was it. The corridor, though dusty, showed no signs of damage from the battle. Given the monsters’ usual behavior, I would have expected them to destroy statues like these on sight. Yet, every statue and wall here remained untouched.

Was there no fighting here? Or rather...

“The monsters never ventured into this corridor?” I asked.

“No,” Laska confirmed. “I heard that this passage had been sealed for a long time. The monsters broke through the walls on the other side of the temple to get in.”

When the monsters attacked, they’d sealed off the front gate—only to be ambushed from behind and trapped inside.

It was possible a doppelgänger had been leading them... especially since no one had known of these creatures’ existence until yesterday.

But at this point, we may never know the truth.

Laska interrupted my thoughts by taking out a knife and showing it to us. Its silver blade was wavy and serpentine, and the hilt was decorated with intricate designs, giving it an aura of luxury.

“To break the seal, you need this key,” she explained.

“Is this a magical item?”

“Right. It’s been passed down through the generations in the line of the shrine maidens.”

She’s loaning us that precious of an item? Or maybe they joined the battle just to give us that key. So, the elite forces only used them to open the seal, then put them on guard duty?

That must have been doubly frustrating for them.

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Near the end of the Corridor of Atonement, Laska stopped and began to examine the wall.

“Hmm, could this be a hidden door marked with an arrow?” I mused.

“Don’t act like that’s something normal,” Mia replied.

The four women of this world looked puzzled at our exchange. Even with the magic of translation, conveying such nuanced cultural references would be a challenge. *Wait... is this even a cultural thing?*

“Yes, there should be a passage for the guards... I’m sorry. It looks like it’s hidden by some high-rank Illusion Magic,” Laska explained.

“Oh, so it’s hidden with magic.”

With that in mind, I cast my newly learned Rank 6 Support spell, Mana Vision. For each rank, this spell allowed me to perceive mana within my line of sight for one minute.

Suddenly, everything around me was bathed in a bright red. I couldn’t help but let out a startled scream.

“What happened, Kazu?” Tamaki exclaimed.

“Are you okay?” Arisu chimed in worriedly. Both girls rushed to my side, supporting me as I stumbled back.

“I’m fine. Just caught me off guard. Looks like I need to adjust this spell,” I replied, still slightly shaken. Luckily, I had already researched how to adjust the vision during my time in the White Room. After about a minute of trial and

error, I managed to see the surrounding mana at a non-blinding level. However, the air around me remained saturated with mana, as if the entire corridor was under a permanent spell.

Could this have something to do with the temple being a lynchpin?

“If you want to hide a tree, put it in a forest,” Mia muttered.

Oookay, so what does that mean?

“If the environment is filled with mana, then hiding a secret door with magic would make it blend in and be undetectable. It’s a basic strategy in high-detection TTRPGs,” she clarified.

“That’s some kind of gamble!” I retorted. But when I thought about it, it made sense. If Rushia were here, she might have provided more insight.

“You’re sure it’s around here somewhere?” I asked Laska.

“Yes, based on what the priest and his entourage told us,” she replied with a nod.

I decided to trust the words of this so-called priest. Asking Laska to step back, I examined the walls with Mana Vision. The overwhelming presence of mana made it difficult to see any differences, but I placed my hand on the wall anyway.

“Dispel Magic,” I chanted.

It seemed my hunch was correct. The wall before me vanished, revealing what lay behind it.

“So... instead of an illusion spell, they created a physical wall with magic?” I speculated.

“Seems like it,” Mia mused. “If we’d known, maybe Earth Magic could have done the trick?”

“I’m so sorry!” Laska interjected.

“No need to apologize,” I reassured her. “It worked in the end, and these observations are useful for future reference.”

Mia playfully puffed out her chest and said, “Just make sure you do better next time, young one.”

She’s probably twice your age, Mia, I thought. But I didn’t dare mention that topic out loud, especially around women.

Shaking off the awkwardness, we entered the hidden passage. It was pitch-black, so I switched on my flashlight. Surprisingly, for a passage that had supposedly been abandoned for years, there wasn’t a speck of dust on the floor. Was this also the work of magic? In that moment, magic seemed a little too omnipotent.

“Were the advance teams told about this passage?” I asked.

“Yes, we informed them, but we instructed them to go through the front if they couldn’t find it,” Laska replied.

Well, that was reckless. Or maybe she’s thinking fortune favors the bold? If they took too long, they might give the enemy a chance to regroup.

That made sense, but it also depended on them not getting wiped out. Strategy doesn’t matter if you’re dead.

I was in no position to criticize someone else’s tactics, but if I was, I’d be a little more cautious. It made me wonder where our different perspectives had come from. Why were the elite troops in such a hurry? From what we knew so far, I couldn’t figure it out. Anyway...

“Couldn’t you have used communication shells to talk to the vanguard?” I asked.

“Those don’t work too well indoors,” Laska began. “They work best in open spaces...”

“Oh, like radio waves?” I asked. But Laska just looked at me blankly—I should have known the term “radio waves” would be lost on her.

Chapter 146: The Storm Temple of Gal Yass – Part 2

At the end of the hidden passage was a sliding door leading to the barracks. Laska told us it was camouflaged from the other side, but just to be careful, we decided to take it slow.

I started by casting “Summon Gray Wolf.” When the door slid silently open, courtesy of Tamaki, the wolf jumped into the corridor. Fortunately, it didn’t seem to be met with immediate hostility.

Beyond the door was a well-lit corridor, wide enough for two people to walk side by side. An orange glow came from the ceiling, probably some kind of magical lighting. After taking a moment to scan the area, the wolf turned to us and gave a soft bark to let us know it was safe.

We all let out a sigh of relief. But before we took another step, a musty, vaguely sweet smell wafted through the doorway.

“This scent... It makes me think there are undead here,” Raska whispered.

“Undead? Like zombies or vampires? But it doesn’t have that rotten smell,” I commented.

“Their flesh has probably decomposed, leaving only bones. Some monsters use these bones as a catalyst to create familiars known as undead. They’re considered monsters, but they don’t require mana stones to summon.”

Ah, so it’s a lot like the familiars I summon, I realized. But the need for bones as a catalyst was intriguing. If that were the case, defeating these undead would yield no tokens. Would we still get experience for killing them? There was still a lot I didn’t know about how experience worked here. If tokens played a role in gaining experience, then... no. When I’d defeated Shiba, I’d gained experience without using any tokens. Maybe the tokens weren’t directly tied to experience after all.

For example, if I summoned a familiar and Arisu killed it, she wouldn't gain any experience. The same would be true if Arisu left the party. This had been clarified by the FAQ in the White Room. But it made perfect sense; if you could gain experience from killing something summoned, it would open the door to infinite leveling.

If this system was like some kind of game, it seemed to me that its designer had been pretty diligent in blocking any loopholes.

"By the way, if there are undead here, does that mean that whoever created the undead is here too?"

"It's very likely," Laska replied.

Mia raised her hand. "So, what kind of monster can create undead?"

"The best known would be the Death Knight. It commands lower undead like skeletons." Laska went on to explain that the Death Knight looked like any heavily armored knight, but its armor was hollow and actually made up the monster itself.

"A walking suit of armor?" I asked.

"It really seems that way." Mia nodded, finding the mental image helpful.

"But it's not an ordinary mob from Romaria or something," I teased.

"Shut up, *Dragon Quest* brain," Mia retorted, making everyone but us look puzzled.

"Sorry," I said.

"Are there any other possible monsters?" Mia asked.

"If you're asking about the most dangerous," Laska began, "there's a legend about Volda Array. It hunts living gods as a god of death."

A god of death? Ha! I'd rather not meet him.

I mean, that thing's definitely god-tier, right? If something like that's waiting for us, the Elite Squad is doomed!

"Just out of curiosity, what kind of undead does this Volda Array command?"

“It’s said that he commands all kinds of undead,” Laska answered. “His most powerful servant is called the ‘Godslayer Swordsman,’ or simply ‘Godbreaker’ in English.”

Godbreaker.

“That’s strangely English. I wonder if the translation spell is trying to be funny. Although it does sound like something out of a teenager’s fantasy.”

Still, it was no laughing matter. Commanding something capable of killing gods? This god of death sounded even more formidable than any divine soldier we’d faced. Though there was no guarantee it would be here.

Still, it would be nice if it wasn’t... But the last thing we wanted to do was make plans based on wishful thinking.

“Kazu, we can’t run away from this,” Mia warned.

“I know,” I replied. “We’re going to face it head-on.” I tousled Mia’s hair in an attempt to lighten the mood, and she groaned and glared at me in mock annoyance. “We’re doing everything we can for now,” I added, trying to calm her down.

“And that means?”

“I’ll send out a scout. Cover me in the meantime.”

I retreated to a secluded corner of the hidden passageway and sat down. I gave the gray wolf a few orders, then cast Remote Viewing on him as he left.

Moving on silent paws, the wolf advanced deeper into the corridor. Behind him, the hidden passage seemed too close, and I noticed his ears twitching.

Being a wolf, he had excellent hearing, making him a perfect scout for such close quarters.

As the gray wolf approached a large room, he stopped and slowly lifted his head. He must have heard something, but Remote Viewing only conveyed sights, not sounds.

As I kept watching through the wolf’s eyes, I realized that in the back of the room, hidden from view by a table and a sofa, something was lurking.

The wolf must have realized it, too, because he turned and retraced his steps down the passageway, following the instructions I'd given him to retreat if he was in danger of being discovered.

The wolf ventured to the other side of the corridor, where the passageway ended in what looked like a storage room. Although there were signs that it had been ransacked by monsters, it seemed to be empty at the moment.

Upon his return, I patted the wolf on the head in gratitude for his diligent scouting. Then I used Deportation to turn him back into MP.

"Sorry, I still can't figure out what kind of monster we're dealing with," I reported.

"That's okay," Mia said. "At least we know *something's* there. And it still doesn't know we're here, so that's even better."

"Whatever it is, I'll just cut it down!" Tamaki chimed in cheerfully.

I looked at her fondly, loving her confidence. Not sure why I was staring, Tamaki just beamed back.

"All right, I guess we'll continue with our usual 'inside' strategy. Sorry, Laska and your team, but you can just stand down for now."

"That's fair enough, since we don't know what we're up against here," she conceded.

We could have entrusted this whole task to Laska's group. But that would mean underestimating the enemy. Since we didn't know what it was capable of, it was best to stick to the basics: using our strongest assets and proven tactics. They were invaluable guides, and I had no intention of wasting their lives in a pointless battle.

In fact, when I thought about it, I could empathize with the men who'd asked them to wait at the entrance.

After casting a variety of buffs, Mia added a Silent Field and Greater Invisibility to my Deflection spell. Arisu and Tamaki were already holding hands, and I tapped them lightly on the shoulders to signal them to move.

The two girls took off, running toward the large room. Grabbing Mia's hand, I followed close behind. While they couldn't see me, I could clearly see everyone else. The worst thing that could happen here was Arisu and Tamaki accidentally attacking each other, but with their hands linked, the risk of that was minimal.

At that moment, I chose to believe in the power of their friendship.

Only about ten meters in front of us, Arisu burst into the room, followed closely by Tamaki.

All right, keep going... Oh, wait.

Tamaki's dress caught on the edge of a sofa, sending her tumbling forward. As Arisu still held her hand, the sudden movement also knocked Arisu off balance.

What... what are you two doing?

Fighting the sudden urge to facepalm, I paused at the entrance to the room. My summoned wolf had been standing in that exact spot earlier, but his short stature had prevented him from seeing the entire room.

Standing upright in the back of the room, like anatomical skeletons in a science classroom, were four bony figures. They reminded me of something you might find in an RPG, with rusted metal breastplates, helmets that covered only the tops of their heads, and armor on their limbs. They wielded equally rusted swords in their right hands, while their left hands held round bucklers. Deep in the hollows of each one's skull, two sinister red lights glowed ominously.

All four turned in our direction.

Did they see us?

No, they weren't looking directly at us, but maybe they had a general idea of where we were. Either way, our element of surprise was gone.

A head-on battle had just become our only option.

Chapter 147: The Storm Temple of Gal Yass – Part 3

We found ourselves facing four skeletons across a room the size of a school classroom.

At first, I'd pegged the room for a dining room, but I realized now that it was some kind of rec room for the barracks. What I'd thought was a dining table was, in fact, a game board. It was divided into squares, much like a chess board or Go board, with protruding pieces in the center. Metallic game pieces about the size of my thumb were scattered all over the board. I wondered briefly if it was normal to have something expensive like metal pieces for rank-and-file soldiers, but maybe this kind of opulence and excess symbolized the wealth and corruption of the temple. But the game pieces were the least of our worries.

The real concern was the strength of these skeletons. In games like *Wizardry*, skeletons were among the weakest monsters. However, according to Laska, skeletons summoned by necromancy came in different ranks. The weakest, comparable in power to orcs, were called Novice Skeletons. A rank above that, with strength similar to veteran soldiers, were "Veteran Skeletons." Beyond these were the Knight Skeletons, said to be stronger than Elite Orcs. And there were even more powerful skeletons; the extent of their abilities was unknown, but some texts referred to them as "Skeletal Champions." Finally, there were skeletons who could use magic, which I'd decided to call "Mage Skeletons."

Now, what were the ranks of these four skeletons in front of us? Their rusty swords and worn armor made them look unimpressive, but appearances can be deceiving.

Tamaki and Arisu recovered quickly from their slight mishap, and, in the silence created by Silent Field, they sprang into action. One of the skeletons raised its shield in defense, but too late—Tamaki swung her silver sword, and the long-range strike connected squarely with the skeleton. The blonde girl then took advantage of the skeleton's disturbed stance and delivered a swift diagonal slash.

The red light in the skeleton's eye sockets faded, the animated bones falling into a lifeless jumble. Almost simultaneously, Arisu gave an upward thrust with her spear. The spearhead extended and pierced a second skeleton's skull, which shattered into pieces. After a brief moment of stiffness, the rest of its bones crumbled to the ground.

Unlike other monsters, however, the bones stayed right where they'd fallen. No gems appeared, either. Apparently, defeating these skeletons wouldn't yield any tokens. Would they even give experience points?

Arisu and Tamaki had been so efficient that it was hard to gauge the strength of these opponents. I sighed, thinking that if I'd let my wolf fight, I might have known a little more about them.

It didn't take Arisu and Tamaki long to dispatch the remaining two skeletons. Mia dispelled the Greater Invisibility and the Silent Field, and we all exchanged wry smiles.

"That was a massacre," I remarked.

"Yep. But it's better that way," Mia shrugged. "Better than letting our guard down and getting hurt."

"Yeah, you're right. I just overestimated them."

"It feels like in computer games, where you can estimate the strength of an enemy to a certain extent," Mia added.

She was absolutely right. This wasn't a game of do-overs, but of life and death, and we couldn't afford to be careless.

"Up to now, the gems they dropped were a good way to gauge their strength," I noted.

"Monsters that don't drop money—what a boring dungeon," Mia quipped.

"Don't call it a dungeon." I laughed, even though in RPG terms it was exactly that.

After ensuring there were no other monsters around, we called Laska and her warriors to discuss our next move. She told us the Necromancer was believed to

be near the center of the temple, near a massive gem called the Heart of Gal Yass.

“The Heart of Gal Yass... Is that the wedge you mentioned?” I asked.

“Yes, one of the five wedges that stabilize the continent is the Heart of Gal Yass. When you see it, you’ll know. It’s a spherical red gem, and it’s large—bigger than an ogre.”

“Wow, so it’s like a ruby that’s almost three meters long?” Tamaki’s eyes sparkled. How very girly of her to be interested in shiny things. Or maybe it was more doglike of her.

By the way, the chapel where the Heart of Gal Yass was located seemed to be relatively close to us. Apparently, there was a direct route through an underground passage that led to the chapel.

So they can send troops to the chapel any time they need to. From a security point of view, that makes sense. As long as the soldiers stay loyal...

Well, the workings of a fallen nation didn’t matter to us. If there was a convenient passage, we would use it. Since the way ahead wasn’t hidden, however, we should assume it was guarded by monsters.

We moved on, using the gray wolf to regularly check for enemies. Apparently, the undead had a unique scent, and the wolf’s keen sense of smell could pick it up. Perhaps it was because the stagnant air had wiped out any other scents.

Our adorable gray wolf did an excellent job of detecting the skeletons waiting in the passage. As an experiment, we had Laska, accompanied by Arisu and Tamaki, run up to a lone skeleton in the corridor.

Laska struggled a bit but managed to crack the monster’s skull with her warhammer.

“I think it’s a veteran skeleton,” she judged, and I decided to trust her judgment.

So the common enemies here have a Skeleton skill of at least Rank 3...? Assuming “skeleton” is an accurate skill description.

Next, it was Arisu’s turn.

In reality, Rank 3 Healing Magic contained a spell called Holy Bolt. As the name suggested, it was a special attack against the undead. However, it was completely ineffective against normal monsters.

We soon came across another lone skeleton, and Arisu unleashed Holy Bolt on it. The magically formed radiant spear hit the skeleton's shoulder, causing it to stagger backward and drop its sword.

"One more shot, Arisu."

"Yep! Holy Bolt."

The second radiant spear struck the skeleton's hip joint so strongly that its hips shattered. The bony monster fell to the ground and remained motionless.

"Knocked out in two shots. Seems pretty strong."

"True. But with Arisu's current strength, it might be more powerful if she just goes in with a physical attack."

That might indeed be true. While there might be situations where it would be advantageous to use it as a long-range weapon, Rank 7 Healing Magic contains a superior version of this spell. If she'd learned that, it might have been more powerful than a physical attack...

I didn't express these thoughts. After all, Arisu had decided to stand next to Tamaki at the front and support her. The somber expression on her face suggested that she'd probably realized that as well.

For now, I stroked her hair gently. Looking up at me, Arisu smiled shyly. "Kazu, no romantic vibes in the dungeon, okay?"

"Oh, sorry," I said, resolving to be more serious.

I'll spoil Arisu more when we're in the White Room later. But since everyone just leveled up with Mekish Grau, the next level-up might be a long way off. At this point, we don't even know if these skeletons will give us any experience points or not.

The team continued their assault, quickly destroying all the skeletons in their path and even those in the surrounding area. I had suggested leaving those ones alone, but Mia had been against the idea.

“If we leave them, they might sound the alarm later. We could get aggro’d,” she’d warned.

“Aggro’d?” Arisu had asked.

“In online gaming, it means a whole ton of monsters aggressively chasing a player.”

Online gaming terms aside, Mia made a valid point. Without Rushia and her powerful area-of-effect attacks, it was best to be cautious. After we’d taken down two rooms with three and four skeletons, Tamaki leveled up. At last, we knew that the skeletons actually provided experience points.

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In the White Room, we started totaling up the experience points we’d earned.

“So, if Tamaki has leveled up and Mia, who only has fifty experience points fewer than her, hasn’t leveled up yet, then...” I began.

“It looks like the Veteran Skeletons are around Level 5,” Arisu finished, tilting her head.

Even if they were Level 5, they seemed weaker than the Elite Orcs. Assuming the monsters operated on a skill system like we did, maybe they were spending their points elsewhere. Arisu’s evaluation had been based on the idea that they had Strength.

“Also, it seemed like they sensed us even when we were invisible and silent,” Mia pointed out.

Ah, that might be another ability they have. Does this mean their basic fighting ability is reduced because they spent their points on skills like that?

As we sat on the floor discussing these ideas, Arisu found a spot right between my legs and plopped down there, looking up at me from time to time.

Arisu’s behind felt so... warm.

“Hey, don’t squirm like that. You’ll stir up some naughty thoughts in me.”

I put my hand on her waist and squeezed gently.

Arisu turned to me, feigning a slight pout, and said, “Honestly!” Her gesture was so unintentionally adorable I couldn’t help but grin.

Before I noticed, Tamaki and Mia had flanked me on both sides.

“It’s always Arisu with you. Not fair,” Tamaki remarked.

“Unfair indeed,” Mia added, and both girls reached out and pinched my cheeks.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry for being overly affectionate,” I admitted, bowing deeply in apology.

“Look at you!” Mia said, stepping on my head.

Oh, now she’s getting cheeky.

I grabbed her foot, causing her to fall. I almost locked her in a submission hold, but then I noticed... *It’s like she’s enjoying it?*

“Why did you stop, Kazu?” Mia teased.

“Well, aside from the fact that your ‘perverted’ side might enjoy it, I felt like I might break a bone or something...” I said.

“Arisu-chan would heal it anyway, right?” Mia asked.

“Well, yeah, of course, but I don’t really have a taste for hurting girls... Not much of one, anyway.” I looked to Arisu for support.

“Um... yeah, that’s right,” she replied, her eyes drifting away for some reason. *Wait, did she misunderstand something?*

Mia, still on the ground, gave me a sharp look. “Guilty. That means you should spoil Tamaki and me a bit more.”

“Well, we can do that after the strategy meeting,” I deflected. After all, first things first, especially with the information we had now.

Chapter 148: The Storm Temple of Gal Yass – Part 4

The next topic of concern was the strength of the enemy, specifically the undead monsters. We had already confirmed in a Q&A session, prompted by the undead-specific magic Arisu had used earlier, that there were zombie-like creatures in this world. If such magic existed, we reasoned, undead monsters must exist too—and the master of the White Room had confirmed our theory.

“Even if it seems a bit redundant now, how about we ask the PC again? Mia, can you help me?”

Turning to the laptop, we began an extensive question and answer session. Here’s what we found out about undead monsters: Undead monsters are vulnerable to attacks specifically designed against the undead.

Well, that’s a given. We probably didn’t even need to confirm it, but it’s always better to be safe than sorry.

Unless there are specific exceptions, undead monsters don’t breathe.

This is crucial. For example, it would be pointless to spray poison gas on a floor that has undead monsters on it. But we also have to consider the possibility that the enemy might use tactics like that against us.

Attacks that generally affect all living creatures, like poison, don’t work on undead monsters.

So that probably means spells that enchant or manipulate thoughts and emotions will be ineffective, too. Like the Rank 6 spell Rushia uses a lot, Dread Fire, would be useless.

Overall, the way the undead worked here seemed a lot like what you would see in zombie movies. The good news was that being bitten by a zombie here wouldn’t result in an infection.

“It sounds like they don’t have pain receptors, so stuff like Heat Metal won’t work on them either,” Mia added.

“So, methods other than direct attacks are mostly ineffective,” I pondered.

“If it’s too hard to immobilize them and we have to rely on direct firepower, should we have reserved Rushia for that?” Tamaki wondered aloud.

It was hard to say what the right call was in this situation. It called for a quick response, and while Rushia used her MP primarily for combat, I had a broader range of uses for mine.

“These halls are narrow. If we choose our battlefields wisely, we won’t be overwhelmed by a horde of zombies,” I pointed out.

“You mean, let them pile up and hope for a system delay?” Tamaki joked.

“It would be great if this was a game where you could exploit processing delays!” Mia laughed.

Unfortunately, this was our reality. No matter how many pieces gathered in one place, there was no limit to the graphics card or CPU. If an army-sized group of people gathered in one place, they’d be the perfect target for area-of-effect magic.

“Hmm, looks like most of the undead have night vision. But, like, skeletons don’t have eyeballs, so they probably rely on mana to ‘see,’” Mia shared after another round of Q&A.

Ah, so they detect things, like a mana-sensing ability. That would explain why our invisibility spells had limited effect.

Still, the slight delay in the undead’s reaction to the invisible Tamaki and Arisu’s attacks suggests that they didn’t rely entirely on mana detection. Unfortunately, the Q&A didn’t clarify which undead creatures had which sensory organs—we would have to find out in combat.

The master of the White Room always has this detached way of keeping certain things out of our reach.

“When the Gray Wolf came up to the entrance of the room, they didn’t seem to notice him,” I remembered.

“Maybe actually entering the room is the trigger, in typical game logic,” Arisu suggested.

Okay, that does seem a bit too game like, but it's a factor worth considering.

"All right," I said. "Next time we come across a room with skeletons, let's test that theory."

We'd have to try different strategies, one at a time. For a while, we continued to share ideas, then we took a break to relax. Seeing that Arisu was a bit down, I comforted her by gently stroking her head until she seemed satisfied. Observing this, Tamaki and Mia approached, and I playfully ruffled their hair.

"Hey! Kazu, that's not fair!" Tamaki protested, feigning outrage.

"I strongly object to this preferential treatment," Mia declared with a grin.

"Please be kind and fair to everyone," Arisu said with a smile.

With a resigned sigh, I gently stroked their heads. Both Tamaki and Mia closed their eyes contentedly.

"Speaking of earlier," Mia began in a soft murmur, looking up at me, "did you think the lady knight smelled a little... off when she hugged you?"

"Well, to be honest, yeah, just a little..."

Both Arisu and Tamaki quickly sniffed their gym uniforms in alarm.

"Relax, you both smell good. Oh, and your navels are showing," I teased.

"I guess these people aren't in the habit of bathing regularly," Mia speculated.

Tamaki wrinkled her nose. "Huh? Isn't that unhygienic?"

"Europe is less humid than Japan, so it seems like it's pretty common," Mia replied. You could always trust her to know these random tidbits.

"But in their case, it's the armor," I added.

"It's like how kendo uniforms get sweaty," Tamaki chimed in.

We all nodded in understanding. In reality, with both of our groups facing life-threatening dangers, it seemed odd to argue over such trivialities. Furthermore, compared to the smell of blood and rot that often pervaded battlefields, a little body odor was hardly worth our attention.

“Um, Kazu-san!” Tamaki suddenly leaned in, her face inches from mine. “When this battle’s over, can you use Summoning Magic to make a cottage? Please?”

“Hmm, seems like a waste of MP, but...”

“Is that... a no?”

Her pleading eyes made it hard to refuse. “All right, all right. I’ll see what I can do, milady.”

“Yay! Thank you!” Tamaki cheered, her mood instantly lifted. She began hopping around happily, and Arisu’s eyes sparkled with joy. Mia and I exchanged amused looks.

“Maybe you should admit that you have a thing for scents?” Mia teased with a grin.

“That would be an unexpected turn,” I replied with a chuckle.

“I read online that it’s not uncommon in France,” Mia added with a mischievous grin.

I wondered if that was true. After some more light-hearted banter, we returned to our original location, with Tamaki deciding to save her skill points for later.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 29	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 4	SKILL POINTS: 3

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Leaving the White Room, we looked into various rooms, searching for skeletons. As soon as we opened the third door, two Veteran Skeletons lunged at Tamaki.

“Wow, I haven’t even gone inside the room yet!”

“That just means that Mia’s theory was wrong. Don’t overthink it!” I shouted.

“Got it! I won’t think!” Tamaki yelled back, lunging for the skeletons. In no time, she had one of them down. At that moment, Mia leveled up.

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Back in the White Room, Mia sighed. “Sorry about that. I guess my theory about the area defense AI was wrong.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s good to have different ideas. And stop calling it AI,” I scolded.

“No penalties then? I was kind of hoping for a naughty punishment.” She pouted playfully.

That girl, always with her antics. We still had one more enemy to deal with, so we quickly headed back. Mia decided to save her Skill Points.

Mia	
LEVEL: 29	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 3

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We promptly dealt with the remaining skeleton and ended the battle. Laska and her party approached us, telling us there was a passage nearby that led to the chapel where the Heart of Gal Yass was enshrined.

Should we keep killing monsters and try to level up? Or should we go straight for the Heart?

It was a hard choice, but...

Laska persuaded our indecisive group, though. “The soldiers are still fighting outside. We need to finish the battle here as soon as possible.”

Right, of course. From their point of view, their comrades are bleeding and fighting every second we delay. Since they’d been ordered to wait at the entrance, their dissatisfaction was understandable. If we, their main force, dawdled, of course they would only get more frustrated. I felt bad for letting us mess around so much, and it didn’t help that we were the only ones here who had to think about gaining experience points and leveling up.

“Got it,” I told Laska. “Let’s go for the Heart of Gal Yass.”

On our way to the temple’s center, we continued to rely on our wolf scout to look for monsters, and we successfully killed three more Veteran Skeletons.

With that, I leveled up.

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In the White Room, we sat in a circle and began our reflection session.

“The real voice of the locals does carry weight,” Mia remarked dryly.

“You always seem so distant, even now,” I observed.

“I mean, we’re all just trying to look out for ourselves here,” Mia replied, her tone sharp and straightforward as usual.

Great; I really appreciate it when someone gives opinions that benefit all of us.

I understood Mia. I was the one who made the decisions, and because Arisu and Tamaki could sometimes be influenced by softer opinions, Mia tended to stick to her position. She was the youngest in our group, despite never acting like it. But considering she was the younger sister of *that* ninja, it made sense.

“Actually, what do you think?” I asked the group.

“What do you mean, Kazu?” Tamaki asked.

“Well, we followed their advice this time, but if we’d ignored it, would it have been bad for us?”

We all pondered that for a moment. How important was it for us to maintain good relations with the locals? Mia’s harsh words, “Strength is everything. They’re weak. They can’t resist us... at least, that’s one way to look at it,” were difficult to counter logically.

“But...” Arisu said, looking at me with a troubled expression. “That feels... lonely. And sad.”

I could tell her words came from deep down, and it made me chuckle ironically. Misinterpreting my reaction, Arisu quickly shook her head. “I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to...”

“No, it’s okay. Maybe I was wrong... You’re right. Logic may dictate one thing, but there’s more to it than that.” I lovingly stroked Arisu’s hair, making the young girl smile.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 34	SUPPORT MAGIC: 6
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 2

I decided to save my Skill Points for Support Magic, and we went back to the Storm Temple.

Chapter 149: The Storm Temple of Gal Yass – Part 5

As we pushed deeper into the temple, not only did we not meet any of the advance units, but apart from the scuffling of our shoes on the stone floor, there was utter silence. Perhaps the temple walls were thick, or perhaps some magic kept it quiet. I'd like to think it wasn't because the elite forces trying to defend this place had all been wiped out.

According to Laska, our position in the barracks was quite far from the route the advance units had taken. It seemed inefficient for us to go in individually from different directions without coordination. But since we hadn't had a chance to plan together with them—and they probably weren't even expecting us to be here—there wasn't much we could do about it.

"At the end of this path is the heart of the Storm Temple, the First Training Ground," Laska informed us at the entrance to one room.

Or is it an exit? I wondered. Behind the broken door lay a dense forest. And yet, at least fifteen meters above it, shining as brightly as the daytime sky, was a ceiling. Birds fluttered between the trees, and at first glance, it was the picture of serenity.

"This somehow feels like a fantasy and a sci-fi dome city at the same time," I remarked.

"The reason the plants are growing so thick is because of the mana coming from the Heart of Gal Yass," Laska explained.

"Hmm, it's basically mysterious energy at this point," Mia commented.

I couldn't help but agree. *Really, can mana make everything possible? Seems like it.*

"If this is a training ground, does that mean there are traps and stuff?" Tamaki asked.

“It’s said this place was once used for serious training, but it was already like this when monsters attacked,” Laska explained. “The straight path that goes to the Heart was supposed to be paved, but it seems like it’s been buried by all this vegetation.”

A step through the door led to a green world of vines and leaves. The floor was completely lost beneath the undergrowth.

It might not even be worth looking for the path, I thought. Maybe we should just walk cross-country to the other side.

I had an idea. “Mia, with all this nature around you, can you use Wind Search?”

“Probably not,” she replied sadly. “Wind Search only works outside; this place has a roof and is definitely indoors.”

Wind Search, a Rank 6 wind spell, allowed one to sense a relatively large area through the fluctuations of the natural wind. However, the need for “natural wind” made it problematic. It got significantly less accurate in humanmade spaces, and in indoor environments, it didn’t seem to work—no matter how many trees you were surrounded by.

“Well, we know exactly which way we need to go,” Laska said. “We should cut through the forest and go straight.”

“We could also fly through the sky, but...” I began.

“If there are monsters protecting the Heart of Gal Yass, they could target us in the air,” Laska said.

Yep, that’s what I was thinking. We’d be an easy target for snipers.

Resigned to our hike, we were about to trudge on when a loud explosion rang out from deep in the forest. The trees rustled from the shock wave. Mia quickly cast Fly and soared into the treetops.

“There’s a cloud of dust and debris forming,” she reported.

“How far away is it?” I asked.

“Straight ahead, near the wall on the other side.”

“That’s where the Heart of Gal Yass is supposed to be.” Laska nodded.

“Could elite units be fighting the monsters guarding the heart?” Arisu wondered aloud.

“Sounds like it,” I replied, signaling for Mia to come back.

While she descended, I summoned a familiar. The one I chose was, of course, my trump card: the Phantom Wolf King Sha-Lau.

A wolf, bigger than any horse, kneeled before me.

“Sha-Lau, I need your assistance again.”

“Master, as you command.”

It seemed that the recklessness of a few hours before hadn’t left any lasting effects. Of course, I knew this from the Q&A in the White Room, but it was still a relief.

“I’m glad you’re safe.” Sha-Lau’s big azure eyes gazed into mine, moving playfully.

Is he relieved to see me again? From his point of view, I disappeared while running away from Azagralith.

Reminiscing could wait. I could feel the shock of Laska and the others behind me, but I chose to ignore it. Quickly, I cast the usual enhancement magic on Sha-Lau.

“We’ll fly just above the canopy toward where the fight’s going on. No invisibility or silent fields this time.”

“Understood, Master.”

“Laska and team, I’m sorry, but you’ll need to follow us on foot.”

It would’ve been a waste of time and MP to cast the Flight spell on people who weren’t part of our main group.

As soon as we’d activated the deflection spell, the four of us, together with Sha-Lau, rose up to hover above the trees. From our new vantage point, we saw explosion after explosion in the distance.

Mia piped up with, “If the vanguard manages to weaken the enemy forces before they’re wiped out, we could swoop in and reap the rewards—that would be quite an experience boost.”

“Mia, this unnecessarily evil attitude of yours... It’s neither charming nor endearing.”

“Hmph.”

We continued our conversation as we flew over the trees, occasionally swerving to avoid trees that stretched up to the ceiling. Some areas were covered with wildly growing vines that formed a kind of net. This was...

“Leave it to me!”

Tamaki, in the lead, swung her silver sword quickly, and about ten meters in front of her, a blade of mana shot out of her sword, slicing through the creeping vines to create a path that we flew through.

As the smoke from the explosions cleared, the forest ended, revealing a plaza beyond. From the center of the plaza, a bright red light shone.

On a pedestal stood an octahedron, glowing the color of a ruby and nearly twice as tall as a human.

So, this was the Heart of Gal Yass, one of five keystones embedded in this continent and an indescribable source of mana...

Near the Heart, a monster exuded an oppressive aura that we could feel even from where we flew.

At first glance, the monster looked like nothing more than a hunched man dressed in a tattered black robe with a hood. However, he was almost as tall as the crimson crystal—standing at about two and a half meters. And if that wasn’t enough, he also held a scythe with a blade longer than he was tall.

Most of his face was hidden under the hood, but I caught a glimpse of it: a lean face with pronounced cheekbones reminiscent of a ghoul, with eyes that glowed a chilling red.

“Wow, he really looks like the Grim Reaper,” Tamaki muttered. Her comment was spot on.

That's it; it's a Reaper.

An undead mage monster of the divine class, Volda Array.

About ten skeletons surrounded the Reaper. On the far left, near another entrance to the plaza, around fifty humans were desperately fighting against a much larger swarm of skeletons.

These must be the elite troops that came into this temple before us.

Most of their opponents seemed to be Veteran Skeletons, and their sheer number was overwhelming—well over a hundred. In addition, eight robed skeletons wielding long staves were shooting flaming arrows from behind the Veteran Skeletons.

“Mage Skeletons?”

“Looks like it.”

Arisu shaded her eyes to observe the battle. “Kazu, they’re shooting flame arrows, and... they’re canceling out the spells the elite troops are casting.”

Just then, one of the mages of the elite soldiers released a spell that looked like spider webs.

The Veteran Skeletons were entangled in countless white threads... but then a Mage Skeleton cast a spell. The spiderwebs glowed with a rainbow light and disintegrated in midair, dispelled. These Mage Skeletons provided crucial support, stabilizing the front line.

This was going to be a problem.

Even if we could break through the hundred-strong skeleton army, Volda Array still had a handful of skeletons close to him—rather fancy-looking ones, clad in pristine white armor.

Their swords and shields were untouched by rust, and in fact, they radiated a light reminiscent of Tamaki’s blade, though theirs shone with an eerie blue glow. However, one particular skeleton stood out. It wore golden armor, had a helmet with a single protruding horn, and its sword was noticeably larger than the others. It also didn’t carry a shield.

It looks special.

“Could this be the Godbreaker?” Tamaki muttered.

Oh, right, there is one with that name... They say it has combat abilities approaching the divine class, if I remember correctly.

“The others must be Skeleton Champions, then.”

So, among Volda Array’s guards, there was one Godbreaker and four Skeleton Champions. Few in number, but each was a formidable force to be reckoned with.

“The chaos will be helpful for us, but we should attack Volda Array directly,” I said without hesitation.

At this point, I saw no need to deal with the lesser enemies. In fact, since the boss was acting as a rear guard, there wasn’t any time for leisurely tactics.

“Tamaki, Arisu, get on Sha-Lau’s back. Sha-Lau, get us close to them right away.”

“Got it.”

“Haste.”

That was the signal. The Phantom Wolf King cast his spell, just as he had done against Azagralith. He accelerated, and with the two girls on his back, the massive form of the Phantom Wolf King shot forward like an arrow.

Chapter 150: The Necromancer

For the time being, the monsters' attention was focused on the elite unit. Fortunately, a few moments earlier, a cloud of dust filled the air between us and the massive ruby octahedron, blocking their view.

That is, until we got out of the wooded area.

If the dust had settled a few seconds earlier, they might have spotted us hovering near the ceiling. And since we didn't have Rushia—who was the best at understanding enemy tactics—confronting them from that distance would have been extremely risky at this stage, when so much was still unknown.

We took flight immediately after the explosion, sending Arisu and Tamaki on Sha-Lau's back for the assault. It was a split-second decision, and it seemed to be the right one.

The Phantom Wolf King and the two girls charged straight at the giant Necromancer. The monster flew like an arrow, his massive scythe outstretched and violet lightning following in his wake. But he hadn't noticed us yet.

This could be our chance!

Although Volda Array was a god-tier soldier, he seemed to be a rear rank type. That probably meant that despite his size, he wouldn't be as resilient as other divine-class beings.

With the element of surprise, the combined attack force of Arisu, Tamaki, and Sha-Lau should have been enough to wipe him out.

Indeed, just before the collision, Volda Array looked up and caught sight of Sha-Lau. He tried to dodge at the last moment, but it was too late. The 2.5-meter-tall creature took a direct hit and was sent flying more than ten meters away.

"Let's go, Arisu!"

"Yes, Tamaki-chan!"

Arisu and Tamaki quickly jumped off Sha-Lau's back and chased after the Necromancer, who had fallen to the ground and was now bouncing violently.

Arisu's thrust and Tamaki's slash were accompanied by a battle cry that echoed with determination. Their blades were absorbed by Volda Aray's black robe, sending the monster even further into the air.

"Got you now!"

In one swift motion, Tamaki sliced the airborne Necromancer in half with her shining white sword. As the robe tore apart, we finally saw what lay within.

A pale, emaciated torso... which turned, in an instant, to bone. At the same time, Volda Aray's hood fell down, revealing a white skull beneath.

What? My mind went blank. Moments ago, he'd looked like a flesh-and-blood wizard... Had he turned into a skeleton?

"It's an illusion!" Sha-Lau's voice echoed in my mind. "That cunning fiend prepared a decoy!"

We've been tricked!

We had thought that by using the elite unit as a decoy, we could divert the enemy's attention and eliminate Volda Aray in one swift move. However, the Necromancer had outmaneuvered us. Volda Aray had used Illusion Magic on one of his minion skeletons to disguise it as himself, then placed it in a conspicuous position.

Of course, this might not mean he had anticipated our attack. If you were a commander, you were always on the lookout for enemy snipers and rogue squads. Mia knew that as well as I did.

Still, I chided myself, you've gotta stop underestimating the monsters and thinking they're stupid. Should have known better.

The skeleton that had been Volda Aray now lay inert on the ground. But in the time it had taken us to realize our mistake, the other skeletons had moved forward. By now, three of the Skeleton Champions and the Skeleton Godbreaker were closing in on Arisu and Tamaki.

Wait, where's the last Skeleton Champion?

Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw that very opponent raise both his hands, and the sword he was holding turned into a scythe.

“Mia!”

“Right. Dimensional Step!”

I quickly grabbed Mia’s hand as she activated her Rank 9 wind spell, Dimensional Step. Simply put, it was a teleportation spell. It let the user teleport to any location within nine hundred meters.

However, it only let you teleport one person per hand, for a maximum of three people, including the caster. Also, you had to be able to see your target location...

Which meant we hadn’t been able to use it until the smoke cleared. In addition, teleporting Arisu, Tamaki, and Sha-Lau all at once hadn’t been possible.

But now it was.

My view shifted, and suddenly I was face to face with a scythe-wielding Skeleton Champion.

If the skeletal monster was surprised to see us appear out of nowhere, he didn’t show it. Without hesitation, he swung his scythe toward the ground.

The dirt erupted, and four more skeletons emerged. Each was equipped similarly to the lower-tier skeletons we’d already fought, the Veteran Skeletons.

So, the enemy had probably been hoping to send these creatures against Arisu. Now that the rest of us were here, though, their focus had shifted to us...

We were on the move, too. My hand touched the handle of the scythe.

“Dispel Magic.”

This Rank 6 Support spell stripped the Skeletal Champion holding the scythe of all active spells, revealing his true form: a 2.5-meter giant wrapped in a black robe.

So that’s...

“Volda Array,” I murmured—and that caught the giant mage’s attention. He shook his hooded head with a sneer. “Just as I thought—posing as one of his own. Well, he had us fooled.”

From deep within Volda Array’s hood, crimson eyes glared at me. In a panic, I kicked off the ground, putting distance between us.

“Storm Bind!”

It only took a moment for Mia’s magic to activate. A tornado sprang up, several meters wide, with Volda Array at its center. The newly emerged Veteran Skeletons were also caught in its fury, struggling to stay grounded amidst the fierce winds.

I knew the tornado would only be a minor setback for someone like Volda Array, just a few seconds’ distraction. But that was all we needed.

“Tamaki!”

“Yes, leave it to me!”

While Mia distracted Volda Array, I glanced back to see Arisu and Sha-Lau drawing the attention of three Skeleton Champions, giving Tamaki the perfect opportunity to lunge at the golden-armored Skeleton Godbreaker.

Wielding a massive sword, the Godbreaker braced himself for Tamaki’s onslaught.

Two more steps, and their blades met. A brilliant golden light emanated from the Godbreaker, meeting the equally brilliant white light from Tamaki’s sword. The resulting shockwave, accompanied by a thunderous roar, sent Tamaki spiraling into the air.

“Wha—*kyaa!*”

With a strange cry, she whirled around and around in midair... but her movement almost seemed deliberate.

Finally, she adjusted her trajectory, unleashing another blast of white light from above.

The Godbreaker stomped the ground with immense force and countered with another golden beam. Another deafening explosion shook the cavern. But by

then, Tamaki had already repositioned herself high above the monster.

“Gotcha!”

Descending immediately below with her shining blade extended in front of her, Tamaki converted her gravitational potential energy into kinetic force and slashed. The Godbreaker tried to parry with his massive sword, but he was a split second too late. Tamaki’s sword struck and landed on the monster’s shoulder armor, which cracked under the force.

The Godbreaker reeled back from the impact, immediately trying to reposition himself.

“Not done yet! Here I come!”

As soon as she hit the ground, Tamaki was running to close the distance between them and press her advantage. The Godbreaker found himself on the defensive, barely able to parry her relentless attacks.

Meanwhile, Arisu and Sha-Lau were having a harder time against the three Skeletal Champions.

One of them appeared to be a near match for Sha-Lau. The Wolf King was hesitating to make any bold moves, wary of the glowing blue swords that the skeletons wielded. Perhaps he was responding to some instinctive sense of danger, and I had to assume he knew what he was doing.

Supporting the Phantom Wolf King, Arisu fluently parried attack after attack of the Skeletal Champions. However, her spear was made for stabbing and wasn’t effective against these bony opponents. Even when she did land a hit on their shoulders or legs, the resulting wounds quickly healed.

Could they have... self-healing abilities?

Turning my attention back to the Godbreaker, who was still busy with Tamaki, I noticed that the damage to his golden armor was repairing quickly.

This looks like it’s going to be a stalemate... which means the outcome of the whole battle might depend on our fight with Volda Aray.

“Kazu, he’s making a move,” Mia warned.

I turned to see the fierce tornado dissipating, nullified by Volda Aray’s magic.

Wait, did he manage a Dispel? If he can do that, why didn't he do it before?

The reason became clear almost immediately.

The dust and debris swirling in the tornado had obscured our view, but once it settled, a startling sight greeted us: the number of skeletons surrounding Volda Aray had increased dramatically.

There must be twenty... no, maybe even thirty of them.

Every opponent standing there was a Veteran Skeleton.

"Come on! Can this guy seriously mass-produce Level 5 soldiers indefinitely?" I complained.

"Looks like it," Mia replied, almost as surprised as I was. "Even for a divine-class guy, isn't that a bit much?"

He could probably only do this here, where we were so close to the Heart of Gal Yass. As proof, there weren't any undead among the monsters wreaking havoc outside. Maybe the undead couldn't leave this area. That thought didn't provide much comfort, though. In this vast battlefield, being outnumbered by hordes of skeletons... And facing an enemy who could produce more whenever he wanted.

"They might be good for gaining some experience," I mused with a grin.

"Seems like a match," Mia agreed with a nod.

This time Arisu, Tamaki, and even Sha-Lau would play a secondary role, setting the stage for Mia and me.

We took to the air, staying low to gain some distance from the approaching skeletons. The skeletons paused for a moment, their hollow gazes shifting to Arisu and the others.

Then I touched down, and it was time to put that distance to use.

"Summon Legion!" I called, loud and clear.

There were several reasons I hadn't been able to use that particular Rank 9 spell until now. But I figured this would be the best place for it—against a multitude of monsters in this open space.

My surroundings shimmered, and countless familiars materialized—ethereal knights astride ghostly pale steeds.

If I could trust the FAQ, there were one hundred knights and just as many horses. Each knight had the power of a Rank 4 Summoned Soldier or a Rank 2 Summoned Vanguard. But the fact that they were mounted gave them a significant advantage.

“Deflection. Haste,” I called, and all one hundred knights and their ghostly steeds shimmered with a golden light.

Then I gave the order to the glowing cavalry. “Charge!”

With a fierce battle cry, the knights gently spurred their horses...

And the onslaught began. The cavalry charged directly at the thirty Veteran Skeletons, and the two forces met in a violent clash of swords.

Chapter 151: The Legion Battle of the Summoners

The battlefield was now divided into three fronts.

Near the entrance to the large room, the elite squad faced the Veteran Skeleton brigade. Behind the Veteran Skeletons, the Mage Skeletons hurled support spells while attempting to fight off the rear guard of our elite squad.

At least thirty meters away, at the wall, Tamaki battled the Godbreaker clad in golden armor. Meanwhile, Arisu and Sha-Lau faced off against three Skeleton Champions. Both sides traded fierce blows. Although Tamaki and her group had a slight advantage in power, the high-level skeletons had the ability to regenerate, resulting in a stalemate.

Near the Heart of Gal Yass, the hundred mounted knights I'd summoned had just matched forces with the thirty or so Veteran Skeletons summoned by Volda Aray. Our opponents had higher skill levels than my own summons, but strength-wise they were no match for the cavalry and their lances. My knights' onslaught was so dominant that it could only be described as a complete rout.

As they crushed more skeletons underfoot, we found ourselves in the White Room.

It was time to raise Arisu's level.

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We didn't need much discussion this time. Everyone knew what to do, and we all knew how this single level increase could drastically change the course of the battle.

"Arisu, you did great out there," I praised, giving her head a gentle pat. She'd shown both dedication and perseverance so far, and I was quite proud of her.

"Thank you, Kazu-san," she replied gratefully. "Now I can finally up my Spearmanship to Rank 9."

Was it just me, or were her eyes getting misty?

Is she really so worried about being behind Tamaki in the weapon skill ranks?

No—knowing her, she’s probably just happy to help me.

“Indeed. But with this, it feels like Arisu and her group have practically won their battle,” Mia commented.

She was right. Arisu and Sha-Lau had struggled a bit since they were outnumbered two to three. Elevating Arisu’s Spearmanship to Rank 9 would probably be the deciding factor in this tight situation.

“Now, all we have to do is win on our side of the field. Or... should we hold out and wait for Arisu and her group to come help us?”

“No, if we drag this out, the mages from the elite brigade might join in, which would be annoying. I think we should move forward and finish this now,” I said.

“Got it. I’ll keep the mages busy.”

We exchanged nods. At this point, all that was left was for everyone to do their part. Arisu quickly updated her skill ranks on her laptop...

ARISU	
LEVEL: 30	SPEARMANSHIP: 8→9
HEALING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 9→0

And then we went back to the battlefield.



It was still too dusty to see what Volda Array was doing, so Mia flew up a little higher.

“Hmm. The boss has retreated a bit, and he’s making more skeletons,” she observed.

I see; trying to strengthen his defenses and gain time, huh? Does he really think such a half-hearted tactic will win against us at this stage?

Well, I'll make him regret his lazy decision.

"Summon Paladin!" I shouted.

Until now, Rank 9 familiars had primarily been the domain of the uniquely contracted Sha-Lau. In the battle against Azagralith, I had prioritized a temporary power boost by awakening the familiar. But now, I had about 100 MP to spare. And just like before, there was a Summoning spell for a Rank 9 familiar—Summon Paladin.

At my command, a warrior in shimmering silver armor appeared. He wore a full helm that hid all facial features, but his form looked generally humanoid. The paladin, just like the holy knights he was named for, made a grand entrance, letting out a deep, booming roar and raising his two-handed sword high above his head.

Suddenly, a bright white light poured down from the ceiling. As the light reached them, the skeletons that were fighting the cavalry writhed.

This attack... It's a lot like that Holy Bolt spell Arisu used earlier. It's specifically targeting the undead!

"I didn't know that was possible," I mused.

"Hmm. Typical paladin. A warrior with middle-school syndrome who vanquishes evil with his holiness," a voice teased.

"Don't call it middle-school syndrome," I retorted. "Anyway, it turned out pretty well!"

Without delay, I began casting the usual buffs on the summoned paladin: Keen Weapon, Physical Up, Mighty Arm, and Haste.

"Don't bother with the small fry. Kill Volda Aray," I instructed him.

"As you command, my lord!" the paladin replied in a thunderous voice, readying his massive sword and charging at the enemy.

At that moment, Mia unleashed a gust of wind, finally clearing the dust from the air. Taking advantage of the opening created by the cavalry in the skeleton

ranks, the paladin charged straight through. On the other side, he lunged at Volda Array, who was in the midst of another summoning, with a fierce battle cry.

Volda Array was ready for the paladin's attack, knocking back the huge two-handed sword with his great scythe. Without missing a beat, he retaliated with a swift slash of his own weapon.

The paladin, however, managed to brace himself, digging his feet into the ground and successfully blocking the blow. Again and again, the sword and scythe clashed. I could barely keep up with half of their lightning-fast exchanges, but every time their blades met, sparks flew and a deafening clang echoed across the room—a noise that cut clearly through the already loud cacophony of battle.

It seemed to be a battle of equals, with neither side gaining the upper hand.

I asked Mia if she could provide support, but...

"I'm a little tied up right now," she reported.

"Right, concentrate on dealing with the Mage Skeletons," I replied.



And it was probably a good call; against multiple mages, a lapse in concentration could turn the tide of the battle in a second. Even when the summoned cavalry reached Volda Aray, they were effortlessly cut down as if they were an afterthought.

I guess relying on the foot soldiers alone won't be enough. Our best hope lies with the paladin.

By my estimation, the paladin should have been the equivalent of a Rank 7 swordsman. Surprisingly, Volda Aray, although basically a rearguard, showed remarkable fighting ability, matching the paladin blow for blow. However, this also showed us how dire things were for the enemy forces. If they had to rely on their mages for frontline combat, it meant our strategy had backed them into a corner.

The goal now was to win with minimal casualties. How many of our elite troops, now effectively serving as decoys, could we keep alive? A quick solution would be preferable.

Looking around, I noticed that Arisu, fresh from her level-up, had just killed one of the Skeleton Champions. Our eyes met and she nodded. I immediately understood her unspoken message.

“Sha-Lau, attack Volda Aray!”

“On it, Master!”

Just like that, the Phantom Wolf King abandoned the Skeletal Champion he was holding and charged forward, enveloped in an aura of purple lightning. His blistering attack was so fast that it left afterimages in its wake, sending a number of Veteran Skeletons flying.

The Skeletal Champions that tried to follow were held back by Arisu, who stepped in to cover Sha-Lau. This meant that, for the moment, Arisu was fending off two Skeletal Champions on her own. But with her Spearmanship now at Rank 9, even with the inherent disadvantages of thrusting, she should be fine. Even if all she could do was buy us some time, that would be enough. Just a little longer, and then this battle would be over.

Sha-Lau lunged at Volda Aray, who, for the moment, wasn't dealing with the paladin. Reacting instantly, the Necromancer summoned a second massive scythe in his left hand, using it to block Sha-Lau's fangs. However, he couldn't stop the Wolf King's momentum, and he staggered backwards.

Seizing his opportunity, the paladin unleashed a powerful diagonal slash. Volda Aray's black robe was torn, and blue blood fountained into the air. I had suspected it, but now I was certain—*this* was the real Volda Aray.

The next moment, the paladin struck again with a horizontal slash. The high-ranking necromancer stumbled backward, reeling from the blow.

Just as I thought we had him, Volda Aray found a small opening and touched the ground. A pre-summoning gesture.

Damn, he's persistent!

The ground around the paladin bubbled, and two skeletons appeared. However, they were significantly weaker than the Veteran Skeletons; they didn't even wear armor. The paladin released a beam of white light, and in an instant, they crumbled into dust.

Meanwhile, Sha-Lau continued his attack on Volda Aray. Perhaps because of his hasty summoning of the undead, the necromancer was unable to dodge the attack. Sha-Lau's sharp claws tore through the flesh of Volda Aray's left arm, sending the necromancer sprawling to the ground in a gush of blue blood.

Elsewhere, it seemed the tide of battle was also turning in our favor. Tamaki, switching to a more aggressive style of fighting, overwhelmed her opponents with a relentless barrage of attacks. She didn't even allow the Godbreaker to regenerate. She had truly awakened as a full-fledged power fighter.

The sheer power of Rank 9 was awe-inspiring. Or perhaps it was a combination of Rank 9's power and Arisu's strategic genius.

Arisu's first strike, swift as an arrow, shattered the head of the Skeleton Champion. Her next strike destroyed the hindquarters of another. Almost simultaneously, Tamaki sliced the Godbreaker in half, armor and all.

Just as I turned back to the biggest fight, the paladin's sharp slash swept away Volda Aray's torso. As the necromancer fell, Sha-Lau lunged, his massive jaws

ripping the enemy's head from his body. The powerful snap of the Phantom Wolf King's teeth echoed, crushing Volda Array's head into oblivion.

A familiar sound echoed in my mind, signaling our level-up. It was a testament to our collective strength and strategy—a hard-earned and well-deserved victory.

Chapter 152: Everyone Level Up

This time, every one of us had leveled up; Tamaki and Mia had even gone up two levels. This was to be expected, considering that we'd just defeated a divine-class being, a monster that was Tamaki's equal, and two others that came close. But still...

"You know, with all this leveling up, I feel like we're missing out on some good resting opportunities in this room!" Tamaki's lighthearted remark elicited laughter from the group.

"That's right," someone else chimed in, "with such a massive level-up, it might be a while before we get another..."

"Exactly. So, let's take this opportunity to get all lovey-dovey!"

"I wouldn't worry too much. I'm pretty close to leveling up again," I said. "If I go solo, maybe ten orcs should do it? Arisu is probably not far behind either."

My attempt at reassurance was met with a collective eye roll from the ladies. *Did I say something wrong?* I wondered.

"Kazu, what's important here is the 'lovey-dovey' part, okay?" Arisu told me pointedly.

"Oh, I'm sorry for being such an insensitive jerk," I said, bowing. It clearly wouldn't do me any good to fight the girls on this. "I'll do my best to be as affectionate as you wish, my lady. If there's anything else you'd like..."

"Wait," Mia cut in. "You just said 'anything,' didn't you?"

"Wait, I didn't mean..."

Ignoring my feeble attempt at backpedaling, Mia ran to the token vendor, clutching a handful of tokens. Before I could process what was happening, she'd inserted all of them into the machine.

In an instant, the appearance of the room changed. A wall disappeared, revealing a new floor. Mirrored tiles gleamed underfoot, and below, about ten meters down a staircase, was a lavish pool filled to the brim with clear water.

“Hey, what’s this?” I exclaimed.

“It’s the Recreation Facility Set. Quite a bargain for just a hundred tokens,” Mia replied with pride.

“The last time I checked, the vendor didn’t have anything like that.”

“Well, while we were all researching the undead, I made a discreet request.” Mia gave a peace sign with a straight face.

You sly fox, I thought.

“You should have told me we could ask for something like that! Why all the extra space?”

“In the Q&A session, I casually mentioned that it would be nice to have recreational facilities. To be honest, I never expected it to get approved, especially at such a low price.”

I nodded, pleased and surprised. The mystery surrounding the owner of the White Room was only growing deeper.

It looked like the pool wasn’t the only new layout the token vendor could provide.

“I feel like this only makes me more suspicious about why this room exists,” I commented.

“Suspicious? Oh, about collecting the tokens?”

“It feels a little roundabout.”

Right, if they wanted to collect tokens, there have got to be much easier ways to do it. Regardless of whether the owner of the White Room brought us to this world or not... No, considering we still don’t know what the room’s for, we’d better not rule out any possibilities.

“At this point, we’ve already spent about two thousand tokens. There’s no going back,” Mia remarked.

“I guess so. But next time, run it by me first.”

“Yes, sir!” Mia saluted, but her face lacked any trace of remorse.

She doesn't regret that at all, does she? She may read the room and adjust her behavior accordingly, but she's pretty uncontrollable. Probably because she knows that even if she's punished, she'll probably enjoy it.

“Can't be helped. We'll just have to make the best of these hundred tokens.”

“Exactly, let's get our money's worth. By the way, there's also a Grassland set. Might be perfect for griffon riding training and stuff.”

The room, its mysteries, and its ever-changing nature continued to keep us on our toes, but at least for now, it offered a new realm of possibilities—which we soon began excitedly discussing.

“It's true. We've had problems before with the White Room not being big enough when we wanted to summon familiars. Now we can test them to our heart's content without worrying about space.”

“Like Kazu did earlier, if we summon the entire army, we might need to practice army battles as well, right?” someone else commented.

“Yeah, but aside from having them charge, I'm not sure how much use they would be in that kind of setup. Do we even need to do army battles?”

“I mean, how do we know Volda Aray was the last of his kind?”

Right, that's a legitimate concern. The existence of multiple Mekish Graus suggested that the so-called elite monsters were more like mass-produced units. And those mass-produced monsters could create an army of skeletons in both quantity and quality. It was crazy, even with the help of Gal Yass' heart.

“Hey Kazu, can we go for a swim?” Tamaki asked suddenly.

“Sure, but... we don't have any bathing suits.”

“We could just do without,” she replied cheekily.

Well, that's a dilemma. Tamaki might not mind, but the rest of us might like a little modesty...

“Actually... we have swimsuits. For Mia, Tamaki, and even you, Kazu,” Arisu announced.

“Uh, Arisu, how?” I said while looking confused.

“I thought we might need them if we all went for a swim together. Sumire told me to pack them,” she admitted.

“But Kazu, wouldn’t you prefer us without anything on?” Tamaki teased.

“That’s not the point, Tamaki,” Mia interjected with a mischievous laugh, and I joined in. It was great to know how well we’d come to understand each other’s sense of humor.

But why the elderly tone?

“Just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not enticing. The flutter of a skirt in the wind, the flutter of the heart to match. That’s the allure of the unseen.”

“Really?”

Tamaki looked at me, her gaze questioning. “Did you have to bring that up now?”

“Is it wrong to just want to enjoy the pool, Tamaki?”

“You know, Kazu, your tone changes when you’re guilty...” Arisu pointed out.

“I know.” I sighed, bowing to a visibly upset Arisu. “I’m sorry.” I knew I was losing the upper hand in this conversation.

Meanwhile, Tamaki started undressing right after receiving the swimsuit from Arisu.

Come on... A little modesty wouldn’t hurt. It’s adorable when you’re shy, you know.

Noticing my look, Mia nodded knowingly, her arms crossed. “Kazu, you’re totally checking out Tamaki while she’s changing, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah, I am.”

Interestingly, the swimsuit Arisu had brought was an old-fashioned school one. She explained that it was a relic from the basement of the Cultural Arts

Center. Sumire had told her that someone must have been saving it as an antique.

“It’s crazy to think anyone wouldn’t want this.”

“Look, Mia, only a certain group of people would think like that.”

“But you’re one of those people, right, Kazu?”

I glanced at Tamaki, who was adjusting the swimsuit around her hips. “Hmm, the bottom’s a little tight,” she muttered.

“Maybe it is.”

“Honesty is appreciated.”

Mia gave a thumbs up, her face expressionless.

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After a refreshing swim, we indulged in a lavish barbecue, courtesy of Summon Feast. After all, one had to rest and keep up their strength.

I leaned back in a lounge chair by the pool, and in no time, I was lulled to sleep. When I awoke, I found the trio—Tamaki, Arisu, and Mia—snuggled up beside me, sound asleep. I could tell from their deep, steady breathing that they were sleeping off the fatigue of that day’s fierce battles.

But, Mia—really? Could you not sleep sprawled across my belly? It gave me nightmares this morning.

“Mia talked in her sleep.” Arisu’s voice broke the silence. I turned to her and met her gentle, smiling eyes. She gently stroked Mia’s hair.

“Be kind to Mia, okay? I think she tends to keep her feelings bottled up.”

“You think so?”

“She’s way smarter than me. I’m sure she has a lot of stuff on her mind that she can’t talk about with anyone. Does she confide in you?”

I looked down at the young girl lying on my stomach. Despite her wit, Mia often hid her vulnerability. Always playful, always seeking closeness, but always

hiding her true feelings. Not your typical *tsundere*, but someone who struggled to be honest. Maybe her abilities made her feel obligated to shoulder everyone’s burdens, even though she was the youngest.

The day before, when we’d had some private moments, I’d felt like she opened up to me a bit. But how much of what she’d revealed was true? With Mia, I wouldn’t be surprised if she had made it all up.

“Mia,” I told her silently, “It’s hard to tell when you’re joking and when you’re serious.”

Mia’s only response was her steady, satisfied breathing.

I just hope she finds comfort in her dreams, at least for now.

Eventually, everyone woke up. We regrouped to discuss what we were going to do next, then proceeded to level up Tamaki’s and Mia’s skills. Tamaki improved her Strength, while Mia focused on her Earth Magic. Both got them up to Rank 5.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 35	SUPPORT MAGIC: 6
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 4

ARISU	
LEVEL: 31	SPEARMANSHIP: 9
HEALING MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 2

TAMAKI	
LEVEL:	SWORDSMANSHIP:

31	9
STRENGTH: 4→5	SKILL POINTS: 7→2

MIA	
LEVEL: 31	EARTH MAGIC: 4→5
WIND MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 7→2

With that, we left the White Room.

Chapter 153: Elite Warriors of the Allied Nations

Back in the other world, we set out to reinforce the elite troops.

Arisu and Tamaki, riding on Sha-Lau’s back, rushed toward the Mage Skeletons and launched an aggressive attack. With each strike, they cut down another enemy, making it look effortless. Even the Veteran Skeletons and their superior kin were no match for their combined power—the girls and the wolf didn’t even give the mages time to cast any spells. And with the elite troops attacking from one side and us from the other, the undead forces were quickly overwhelmed.

In fact, the elite squad managed to subdue wave after wave of skeletons without suffering any serious casualties. The undead fought bravely, but theirs was a lost cause.

Over the course of the battle, I leveled up, followed closely by Arisu, Tamaki, and then Mia. But this time there wasn’t much we needed to do in the White Room. On a whim, we sent a few questions to the Q&A, then went to the neighboring room that Mia had added to practice our magic and teamwork.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 36	SUPPORT MAGIC: 6
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 6

ARISU	
LEVEL: 32	SPEARMANSHIP: 9
HEALING MAGIC:	SKILL POINTS:

5	4
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TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 32	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 5	SKILL POINTS: 4

MIA	
LEVEL: 32	EARTH MAGIC: 5
WIND MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 4

When the last skeleton had fallen, a middle-aged man with white hair and a purple robe—probably the leader of the elite unit—approached us. The man extended his right hand to no one in particular.

“I’m very grateful for your help,” he said. “I’ve heard that in your customs, a handshake is a sign of friendship. Is that correct?”

“Yes, it is.” Mia promptly stepped forward and shook the man’s hand.

The man seemed surprised; he probably thought Mia, clearly the youngest among us, was our leader. But in a second, he shook it off, as if remembering that every group must be different.

Well, considering how young we all look and remembering someone like Leen...

Wait, Mia! What are you doing now?

When I turned around, Mia blinked at me innocently, signaling a *leave it to me* gesture.

Oh, I see. Since I hadn't been able to make contact with the World Tree soldiers last night, she was probably taking precautions against further misunderstandings. While I appreciated her protective nature, I could have told her I wouldn't make the same mistake twice...

I had to admit, though, that Mia's diplomacy was masterful. She succinctly explained our roles and why we were here to the man, who was at least two decades her senior. She even made sure to mention how instrumental Laska and her team had been in the victory, thus enhancing their reputation.

In fact, a certain someone emerged from the forest just as Mia was reaching her conclusion. She turned smoothly to the female warriors, saying, "Thank you. We couldn't have gotten here so quickly without all of you."

Laska and the others seemed a bit bewildered by Mia's words, such a display of innocence—manufactured in true ninja fashion.

Not like being a ninja had anything to do with it.

"Can you handle the rest of the cleanup?" Mia asked the old guy matter-of-factly. "We may have to serve as reinforcements in other places. And we were hoping to go back to the World Tree as soon as possible."

"Of course," the man replied. "Now that I've seen your abilities for myself, I'm convinced. We shouldn't waste exceptional talents like yours on cleanup."

Ah, that Mia. She smoothed the way for our departure.

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And that's how we got back to the World Tree.

Leen listened to our report and praised us for a job well done, her face breaking into a genuine smile.

At the end, though, when Mia summed it all up, she couldn't help but chuckle.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Leen told me. "You're their leader, not a negotiator. Rushia told me about you. You're a strategist, but your talents are best used in leading a small group."

“Well... she’s got me down to a T,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Given enough time, one might work on their weaknesses and nurture their strengths. But now is not that time.”

She was right. If we lost even one of these battles, the entire continent could fall, taking us with it.

In such a dire situation, there was no room to nurture and train. If we wanted to come out on top, we just had to use the assets we had as efficiently as possible. Especially considering that our group of five, including Rushia, was the Light People’s trump card, their ultimate weapon. If that ultimate weapon was stumbling around in unfamiliar territory, it wouldn’t just be a waste—it could cost us everything.

Actually, when I think about it... Isn’t my own mental state our team’s biggest vulnerability?

I couldn’t afford to start getting negative.

“How’s Rushia doing?” I asked.

“She’s sound asleep,” Leen replied. “I heard what happened. It was a necessary risk.”

Exactly. She did what she had to do, even if it was a bit aggressive. As long as she’s safe, that’s all that matters for now.

“How are the other battlefronts holding up?”

“It seems the monster army attacking the World Tree has yet to figure out a way to breach the barrier. The latest reports from the Holy City Akasha and the Spire of Haluran are that there were confirmed explosions within the bases after the monster army was lured inside.”

The strategy at these locations had been for the defending troops to ensnare as many monsters as possible before initiating a suicidal explosion. It was good to hear that the plan had been successful.

Although, in the process, we’ve lost two of our strongholds and countless lives...

“Did one of the Four Heavenly Kings get caught in the explosion?”

“Most likely.”

“That’s... quite a relief.”

Both places would have been under the command of monsters of the same rank as Azagralith. If we had defeated them... that would have been a major victory. That meant the only two of the Four Heavenly Kings who remained would be Azagralith and the one attacking the World Tree.

But I wonder, if the others were like Azagralith, given how ridiculously powerful he was... would they be defeated by just one explosion? I’d like to think so, but...

“What about the last one, the Underground Temple in Rown?”

“It seems to be in a stalemate. They haven’t reached the entrance of the temple yet.”

“Are the enemies there that strong?”

Leen gave a wry smile. “That’s part of it. In times past, this land was covered in a rich forest. Now it’s shrouded in a thick fog, and that fog is enchanted with a spell of confusion.”

A spell of confusion, huh? Even for a certain pair of experienced ninja siblings, that sounds challenging.

“For now, why don’t you rest? We may need your strength again, but you need to recover your MP,” Leen said.

That was a good idea; even though we had recovered a bit on the way back, we could still use at least an hour of rest—especially Mia and I, since we couldn’t do much without our MP. We thanked Leen and left her tree hollow.

I wanted to regroup with our Cultural Arts Center group, who were waiting, but...

“Kazu-san, Kazu-san,” Tamaki said, tugging at the hem of my jersey. “Remember our promise?”

She looked up at me with those pleading eyes.

A promise... Oh, right!

“A bath in the cottage?”

“Yeah, that!”

“Well, let’s go downstairs and summon the cottage.”

I wasn’t sure whether it was appropriate to create something like that just to take a bath, but if anyone complained, we could just dismantle it later.

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Descending from the treetop village, we moved some distance away and summoned the hut in the shadow of the Great Tree. I then summoned water for the bath and heated it. As an afterthought, we also summoned a modest tea set for a quick teatime.

I was using a lot of my still-depleted MP, but in my current state, I’d recover in less than ten minutes.

Hmm, if we were going to have a break, maybe we should have invited Rushia too.

“Let’s get in the bath, Kazu-san!” Tamaki urged me.

“The bath isn’t that big, you know.”

“Aww, it’ll be a bit cramped, but we can make it work!”

Looking at the tub, I didn’t see a way we could “make it work.” With a wry smile, I managed to dissuade Tamaki. The other girls seemed slightly disappointed, too, as they all took turns bathing.

“Maybe I should have summoned a fortress with a bathhouse-sized tub, even if it costs more MP.”

The idea of a more mature bathing experience *was* rather appealing.

But we were still in the middle of an ongoing operation. It would be best to refrain for now.

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Alone, I went to the upstairs bedroom and laid down on the soft sheets. Placing my hands under my head as a makeshift pillow, I stared at the grain of the wood on the ceiling, lost in thought. My mind drifted back to Mia's skillful handling of the negotiations earlier.

I'm really not cut out for negotiations, am I?

Let the experts do their job, as they say. When you've got someone skilled right next to you, it's best to leave it to them. In this case, that person was Mia.

What worried me, however, was that she seemed to be overdoing it in her efforts to accommodate everyone. Even Arisu had expressed concern about Mia's physical and mental exhaustion.

After all, she was a young girl who had just graduated from elementary school half a year ago. She was the smallest of us, too. She must be burning through her physical energy quickly, and with the added burden of intellectual tasks...

Are we relying too much on Mia?

Without her, our group would fall apart, no doubt about it.

She should get more rest...

"But there's no time for that, is there?" I mused aloud.

I chuckled ironically and closed my eyes. It would be fine. Mia was always with us, every step of the way.

Maybe I was more tired than I realized, because sleep quickly overcame me.

***To be continued in Min-Maxing My Support and Summoning Magic in
Another World, Volume 7.***

Side Story: Shiki Yukariko Doesn't Need a Balance – Part 3

On the evening of the third day, the twenty-six of us from the Cultural Arts Center escaped from the floating island that had attacked our school's mountain and teleported to the treetop city where Kazu and his friends had mentioned that the people known as the Light Tribe lived. Even though it had only been evening at the CAC, this treetop city was already shrouded in deep darkness.

We found everything just as Kazu had described. Upon reaching the teleportation gate, which was located in a hollow tree, we were greeted by a petite woman named Leen and her attendants. On Leen's head, dog ears flicked animatedly. Like Kazu had mentioned, every member of the Light Tribe looked like a demi-human, with animal ears or tails.

When we saw the imposing men armed with spears, I think we all tensed up a little. They were pretty intimidating. But then Leen waved the men away with one hand.

"You must be Shiki," she greeted. "Mia mentioned you—said you were quite the leader."

"Mia does know how to put the pressure on." I nodded, trying to keep the tone light.

Leen responded with a soft chuckle.

Oh, so she's kidding, too?

As we began our information exchange, students from the high school teleported in. The kids from the CAC group instinctively retreated to the edges of the floor, looking suspicious. Among them, Sakura stood out, clutching her spear tightly.

Oh, Sakura, I thought with a sigh, always so ready to take on the boys.

“It’s okay, Nagatsuki-san,” Sumire comforted her. “These people are the ones Mia’s brother trusts.”

Our curvy Sumire came off as a little slow on the uptake sometimes, but in moments like this, she always proved to be quite reliable. I even think she had a knack for reading people’s emotions. And it made sense, considering she was a good friend of Arisu’s and Tamaki’s.

A girl stepped forward from the group, her no-nonsense demeanor and the color of her tracksuit indicating she was a senior.

So, she must be the subleader I’ve heard about.

“Sorry, our idiot... I mean Tagamiya, is still on the other side. I’m Akira Narimiya, the subleader. You can just call me by my first name.”

“All right, Akira-san. I’m Shiki Yukariko... Well, I don’t really like my full name. Can you just call me Shiki?”

“I heard about you from Tagamiya. Nice to meet you, Shiki.”

Akira and I shook hands. I loved how she called Yuuki an idiot. From what I’d heard, that was exactly why she was his favorite. She didn’t worship him, instead giving him a much-needed reality check.

Considering that I’d founded an organization at the Cultural Arts Center that worshiped Kazu and me, that was something I preferred not to think about.

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Within a few minutes, the magic circle on the ground glowed again, and Yuuki appeared. The students of the CAC, seeing him for the first time, stared at him with wide eyes.

“A ninja...”

“He really is a ninja...”

“Mia-chan’s older brother really is...”

Whispers filled the air, overlapping one another. If Mia had been there, she probably would have died of embarrassment.

Yuuki just greeted Leen politely and calmly.

“Are you Mia’s older brother?” she asked. For some reason, she seemed extremely suspicious of Yuuki.

His face showed the ghost of a wry smile, but he shook his head. “I’m not as impulsive as my sister. Yes to animal ears, but no to touching.”

“Shut up, you damn otaku,” Akira hissed, giving Yuuki-senpai a kick.

What the hell are they doing?

Well, the high schoolers and the CAC group were laughing, so maybe it was all in good fun.

Yuuki-senpai was really good at playing the fool, which didn’t seem very appropriate for a leader...

Just then, another magic circle appeared again, and three high school boys appeared simultaneously.

Huh... What’s that?

There was a... disturbing feeling that I actually found quite scary.

Suddenly I realized that my scouting ability was reacting to something...

In the next moment, another magic circle shimmered into existence, and out came a woman holding a silver sword, just like Tamaki’s.

“Ah, Keiko...” Yuuki began, but the woman visibly stiffened and ignored him.

She took a step forward, toward the three high school boys who had appeared earlier.

“Wha...?”

All around the room, murmurs of confusion slipped out.

But in the next moment, they turned into screams.

The woman named Keiko swung her silver sword horizontally.



One of the high schoolers was cut in half at the torso. Blue blood gushed out like a fountain.

Yes, blue blood.

“It’s a monster!” I shouted, instinctively positioning myself to shield Leen.

The other two male students who had teleported in with him rushed at us, brandishing their spears...

“You won’t get past us,” Yuuki declared.

He acted with speed and precision. Two quickly thrown knives pinned the boys’ boots to the ground, and they stumbled forward.

Keiko closed in on them, and both imposters met their end with a single blow.

And to my astonishment, their bodies vanished. Each left behind two blue gems, making a total of six.

“What... What just happened? Can anyone explain?” Leen asked with a tense expression.

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Doppelgänger.

The name Mia had blurted out had become the official term for these monsters that imitated humans.

For us, it was a term we were familiar with from games.

At Keiko’s suggestion, the hunt for doppelgängers began. Both the high school group and the CAC group got their arms cut with a knife. If red blood flowed, they passed.

In the end, two doppelgängers who had infiltrated the high school group were exterminated.

Or, to be more precise, when they realized they couldn’t escape, they took their own lives—like any good spy—so we couldn’t get any more information from them.

Fortunately, there were no doppelgängers in the CAC group.

“Kazu and the others haven’t gotten back yet,” Sakura murmured.

Indeed, we’d waited hours for the magic circle to light up again, but no one else had come. From what we heard from Leen, it seemed certain that her hawk familiar had been killed... And the five of them, including Kazu, were stranded on our school’s mountain.

Isolated in a land invaded by the enemy’s floating fortress and the Four Heavenly Kings, one of them being Azagralith.

“We’ll send another hawk there,” Leen assured us, and her words did a lot to calm the panicked CAC kids.

“Everything will be okay. Knowing Kazu and the others, they probably fled to the back of the mountain. It’s a huge mountain, so they would be hard to find there. In the meantime, I’m sure Leen-san will rescue them,” I added.

In reality, I wasn’t sure if the ogres would let this happen. I saw their chances of survival as fifty-fifty... but it wasn’t like I could say that out loud.

We had to stay positive.

I slapped my cheeks to cheer myself up and turned to Leen. “Is there a possibility that these doppelgänger monsters have infiltrated the Light Tribe?”

“It’s very likely.” She nodded. “We’ll look into it immediately. Excuse me, but could some of you come with me as guards?”

“I will!” Keiko volunteered. As a Greater Ninja, it would be great to have her around. From our side, we also decided to send Sakura.

After Leen and the others had left, a cat-eared lady-in-waiting led us to a tree house at the edge of the treetop city. One had been prepared for the CAC group and another for the high school group.

As soon as we stepped inside, we pushed the button to start the generator. The sound of the engine coming alive made the lady-in-waiting jump.

“Now... we have electricity. Yuuki-senpai, about our next steps...”

Beside me, Yuuki stood uncharacteristically lost in thought.

It wasn't like him, but it must have been because he'd delegated the leadership role to the subleader, Akira.

I sighed and patted his head lightly. "I get that you're worried about Mia-chan, but pull yourself together."

"Hmm... My apologies. I'm still quite inexperienced..."

"You can pour out all your worries to Keiko-san later when you're alone. But for now, be the dashing man that you are," I said, giving him a playful pat on the chest.

No, we don't have the luxury of wallowing in our worries, I thought.

"You really are more attractive than the rumors say, honorable Shiki," Yuuki said.

"Wait, who said that? Kazu-kun? I'd like to hear more about that."

Feigning indignation, Yuuki quickly covered his mouth and made a hasty exit.

Honestly, that guy...

I watched him disappear over the suspension bridge with my hands on my hips and sighed.

"He really can't help teasing people, can he?" I asked Sumire.

"He's just clumsy," she muttered as she started her computer.

She really understood him.

Back Matter

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While also serving as a fleet admiral in a certain ship-girl training browser game, I began writing when I decided to post stories on the “Shousetsuka ni Narou” self-publishing website, and here I am now! My admiral duties are currently on hold. (As of November 2015.)

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